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RITA

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A Thesis

in

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of English

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ABSTRACT

RITA

Nino P. Ricci

In its final form, *Rita* will consist of three parts. Part One, which comprises my thesis, is told in the first person by Vittorio Innocente and takes place in the fictional village of Valle del Sole, in central Italy. Though part of a larger narrative, Part One in itself forms a coherent whole--it details the hardships of Cristina Innocente, who, in the absence of her husband, who has emigrated to Canada before the action of the novel begins, becomes pregnant from an affair she has been having with a stranger living in a neighbouring town. Cristina is cursed by her father for her actions and ostracized by her townspeople, and eventually, on the pretext of going to join her husband in Canada, she flees Valle del Sole with her seven-year-old son Vittorio. While crossing the Atlantic, however, Cristina goes into premature labour and dies. But the baby, Rita, survives, and becomes the major character in parts Two and Three.

My major concern in Part One was to create a strong sense of the world of Valle del Sole and of the social forces that operated there--religion, superstition, tradition--and then to subject that world to the challenge Cristina embodies, with her blatant disregard for taboos and social strictures. In a larger sense, Cristina is also the force of history--the medieval world of Valle del Sole is one which is crumbling, subject to the twin strains of emigration and encroaching modernity. In terms of the novel as a whole, Valle del Sole, and the memories of his mother connected with it, will become for the narrator a lost world of innocence which he strives unsuccessfully to return to.

The places that we have known belong now only to the little world of space on which we map them for our own convenience. None of them was ever more than a thin slice, held between the contiguous impressions that composed our life at that time; remembrance of a particular form is but regret for a particular moment; and houses, roads, avenues are as fugitive, alas, as the years.

Marcel Proust

Remembrance of Things Past -

Prologue

London, on the last night of my life, was very obliging--it had wrapped itself in a shroud of maritime fog, and I stepped out of Victoria Station to find the city already asleep and dying, its streets and alleys choked, its lamps only small throbs of yellow in a haze of encroaching white.

Somewhere in the maze of streets between St. James's Park and Leicester Square, en route to my hotel, I lost my way. After fifteen minutes of twistings and turnings, of hearing my footsteps echo dully in the empty, smothered streets, I found myself once again at the entrance to the park. I set down my bag and stood staring through the gates, into the murk beyond them. I had passed through the park on my way up but now the gates were locked--it was past eleven.

'May I help you sir?'

The voice had come from my left. I turned; from the light of a street-lamp I could just make out in the fog a dark shape some twenty feet down the sidewalk. I held my place at the gate while the object moved towards me; it grew misty for a moment as it stepped into the space between two pools of light, then came suddenly into sharp focus. A policeman, black-uniformed and small, round hat riding low on his

head, night stick propped under one arm. He stopped a few feet from me, so that we shared for a moment the small, private circle of clarity that bodies claim from fog.

'I've lost my way,' I said. My tongue felt thick and numb. 'I'm looking for the King's Crown. Along Charing Cross.'

'Oh, yes. The Crown. I know it.'

He walked with me as far as Trafalgar Square.

'Bad night,' he said. 'We haven't had a fog like this since '57.'

'Sorry?'

'Since '57,' he repeated, louder. 'Since the Clean Air Act.... Well, here we are. Straight on from here, on the left.'

'Thank you,' I said. 'Thank you very much.'

'That's all right.' He stared down at his hands. My gratitude seemed to distress him. 'But mind you get off the streets. There's no telling what's about in this weather.'

The hotel was a narrow Georgian building of blackened brick wedged between two bookstores. The lobby, small and dimly lit, was nearly deserted--a balding, spectacled man stood behind the desk and a dark-uniformed porter was slouched in the lobby's only furnishing, an old Victorian love seat. The tourist brochure at Victoria Station had said the hotel had once been owned by Shelley. But not, I saw now, the Shelley of Adonais and the West Wind--a small brass plaque near the desk paid tribute to Richard Maynard Shelley, 'historian and scholar, b. 1749 d. 1782, author of *A History of the British Isles From Roman Times to the Present Day*.' Beneath the plaque an arched niche held the white marble bust of a balding man with a long, aquiline nose.

I had called ahead from the tourist office. The hotel had advertised private baths.

'Yes,' the desk clerk said. He smiled. 'We've been expecting you. I hope you didn't lose your way in the fog.'

The porter took me up a narrow staircase to room 213, the number painted on the door in a black italic script festooned with loops and swirls. Inside, the room smelt of mould and must, of centuries of unrelieved dampness and quiet rot.

'You'll have to feed the meter, sir,' the porter said.

I looked at him, not sure I understood; but his face remained dead pan beneath his small blue porter's cap. A joke, perhaps--I forced a smile, then reached into my pocket and emptied what change I had there into the porter's hand.

'Thank you, sir.'

I looked around the room to make sure everything was in order. It had the worn look of a boarding house--a round spot on the rug from some ancient spill, a few cigarette burns on the dresser. The curtains were of heavy red velour, but faded from sun and age. The bed, with its thick English blankets, rose up from the floor like a loaf of bread. Above it hung a sentimental water colour: mother and child. Someone had chosen that painting and placed it there--picked it out from among others in a shop along Oxford Street or in one of the stalls along Portobello Road, walked away with it tucked under one arm, wrapped in brown paper, driven a nail finally into the centuries-old plaster to hang it just there, where I saw it now.

'Thank you,' I said to the porter. 'I won't be needing anything.'

I locked the door and started my preparations.

I had abandoned most of my luggage over the past few days, and had only a small overnight bag now. I reached into the side pocket of it and pulled out a little box of razor blades I had bought earlier in the day, at Calais. They were the old type, with two edges--I had had to try three different shops before finding them.

The bathroom was decrepit and cramped. The floor, of bare hardwood, warped and discoloured, rolled beneath my feet as I stepped over it. A short ball-and-claw tub, streaked brown under a steady drip from the faucet, had been crammed between an air shaft and the toilet. Above it, on a triangular ledge, sat a squat electric water heater. I reached up and flicked a black switch on the heater's side; a red light came on, and the heater began to gurgle.

I set the package of razor blades in a wire soap dish that hung down inside the tub.

On the train in from Folkestone, I had scribbled a few instructions on a piece of loose-leaf. All that remained of my father's money I had left to Rita, though I did not know where she was, or how she could be reached. I pulled the piece of paper out of my bag now, folded it neatly in three, then slipped it inside an envelope I found in the drawer of my night table. I stood for a moment with a pen poised over it, but I could not think who to address it to. Finally I set down the pen and propped the envelope, blank-faced, against the base of a lamp.

I heard a ticking but could not make out where it was coming from. It seemed to echo the drip of the faucet in the bathtub, each drip creating now the expectation of its shadow-- drip, tick, drip,

ti ck, dri p.

The water would be some time in warming. I went to the window, pulled back the curtain; but the mist outside held the world back like a veil, I could barely make out the buildings across the street. A few cars were still moving along Charing Cross--taxis, mainly, dim forms pushing through the mist to emerge briefly black and solid below me before disappearing again in the other direction.

I moved away from the window and sat on the edge of the bed. I could still hear the ticking; it seemed more insistent now, had sped up slightly and moved out of synch with the dripping faucet. I sat listening, waiting for the tick and drip to fall back into the same rhythm; but the timing of the sounds remained a split second off. My eyes were following the floral pattern of the room's wallpaper, rose, space, rose, space, rose, trying to pick out there a clue to the ticking's changing rhythms, as if at any moment drip, tick, and floral pattern would come together into perfect order, and some riddle would be solved. But no, the wallpaper too had quirks and irregularities, roses giving way to flowers I couldn't name, these to small, bent figures in frocks and kerchiefs. I squeezed my eyes shut, opened them, squeezed them shut again. Finally I went into the bathroom, placed the plug in the tub's drain, and began running the water. The water was warm, but not hot; it would have to do.

I undressed carefully while the tub filled. My shoes I set near the night table, the socks tucked inside them; my pants and shirt and underwear I folded neatly and packed inside my overnight bag. I placed the bag on the ground next to my shoes, then sat down on the edge of the bed

again, naked, my skin tingling. It felt good to have my clothes off; I ran my hands up and down my thighs, my calves, feeling the muscle and bone there, the heat of my blood. This was my body: for a moment I understood with perfect clarity what it meant to have a body, the wonder and the tyranny of it, the strangeness. I could not stop touching myself, sat for a long time exploring the textured surface of my skin, the lines on my knuckles and palms, the hairs and moles on my chest and arms. I had carried a body for so many years and yet was not on familiar terms with it--it might have been some strange thing washed up by the sea, sprouting limbs whose purposes, lost in the recesses of time, would never be known.

A sound of splashing: I turned towards the bathroom to see a sheet of water spilling like curved glass over the rounded edge of the tub. I rose to turn off the faucet, then reached into the tub to release some excess into the drain. A thin layer of water had collected on the floor; it seeped quickly into the floorboards, turning them a wet grey.

From the bathroom doorway I looked around my room, saw that the envelope was still resting on the night table, that my bag was still sitting on the floor beside the bed. There was nothing else to do; I turned, stepped into the tub, and lowered myself slowly into it, the water rising in counterpoint to my descent, coming up once again to near the tub's rim. The water was tepid; it chilled me as I sank into it, stripped me down to a second layer of nakedness.

When I had settled myself I reached into the soap dish and picked up the package I had placed there. It was soggy now; it fell apart in my hands as I tried to open it. Inside, the tissue paper that the blades

had been wrapped in had turned to mush. The blades, of paper-thin chrome, clung together from the wet. I cut my thumb trying to pry one free, and instinctively brought it up to my mouth to suck on the wound.

When I had pulled a blade free I held it between thumb and forefinger of my left hand, poised over my right wrist. I kept the wrist submerged slightly beneath the surface of the water.

I brought the blade against my skin, hard, and made an incision of about one and a half inches. I closed my eyes.

I could hear the ticking again. Perhaps it had never stopped. Or perhaps my memory of it had called it up now: it seemed to be coming from very close by, from inside my head. For a moment I sat back in the tub, eyes closed, body limp, and allowed the sound to fill me, to set the timing of my breathing, my heart beat, my thoughts; but then it separated itself cleanly from me, like a spirit suddenly fled, and I knew it had an external source. I opened my eyes and looked over to my left--the cabinet under the sink. I reached over and opened the door.

The space squalid with old grime and yellow stains, stank of dampness and mildew. To the right of the drainpipe, riveted to the wall, was a black metal box. A small brass plate near the top of it read, 'Instructions: 1. Insert 10p in slot. 2. Turn handle.'

You'll have to feed the meter.

My coins--I had given them all to the porter. A misunderstanding. With each click of the meter now, electricity was draining away from the room, till soon the room would wind down to stillness, and dark. A small panic began to build in my gut, the panic of having miscalculated at a crucial moment, and a dozen small and petty details--a bald-headed

bust, a number on a door, a picture over a bed--seemed suddenly to come together into a single conspiracy that ended just here, with this ticking meter. I looked up to where the water heater crouched on the ledge above me, saw the small light still glowing in its side, began instinctively to rise to quench it. But already it was too late--the water had become a part of me now, rich and crimson near my submerged wrist, a pale pink towards the tub's end, and my wrist, like the extremity of a cord leading back to the darkness of a womb, refused to rise above the surface of it.

Too late. There was nothing to do now but wait, wait for the meter to wind itself down, for the ripples forming from the dripping faucet to stretch themselves out over the surface of the water, and die. I lay back in the tub, feeling my body weigh me down like a sack of sand. I sank lower, heard water spilling again over the tub's sides. My mind retreated towards sleep, tugged there gently by small figures, young maidens in kerchiefs and frocks. See, they had made me a bed of roses and daisies and Angels' Tears....

The meter had slowed down, the ticking faint and plodding, moving at the pace of dreams, each sound surrounded now by long, lazy silences which threatened to stretch out endlessly, the next click catching me by surprise, dragging me up for a brief moment of air and light before I sank again into twilight. Time had slowed now almost to the point of stopping; I could breathe or not breathe, my heart could plod on or stop, it did not matter. Someone would come in a moment, though, to sit at the end of the tub and give me a word, a shibboleth. I could hear him knocking already at my door, calling me by name, and talking about

blood and water.

'I died once before, in that way,' I say. 'If there's time, we'll speak of it.'

Blood and water, seeping through the cracks of the spirit's bark, eating the planks with silent rot. Come in, Mr. Shelley, and sit with me, and tell me all--the secret of your death, of sea and sail and tempest, your bloated body washed up on the sand; of the sea's gluttony, those corpses wasting on the ocean floor, food for fishes, eyes become pearls. *Margherita.*

'Die,' he whispers, 'die, if thou wouldst be with that which thou dost seek.'

I was in a cave, in a warm dark pool. One by one their frocks and kerchiefs fell away and they stepped down beside me. They held me in the water and caressed my calves, my thighs. I wanted to bring my hand up, run it over the smooth curve of breast, of cheek. At the mouth of the cave, rough white pillars tapered down from the ceiling and up from the floor like fangs.

They were knocking again. Two of them, two voices, two Shelleys. One of them, with bald head and sinewed neck and aquiline nose, risen off the face of a coin I carried in my pocket--an impostor. Back onto the coin, please, sir, and I will slip you into the slot and be done with you. Look, you have broken the windows, with your pounding--the fog is coming inside. Let me sleep now, I say. Later we will talk. The meter, you see, is winding down: in a moment it will begin its wild ringing, and it will be time to rise. My father will be waiting for me in the fields--there are miles and miles of beans to be hoed, and toma-

toes too, we will do them together, laughing and talking and stopping at ten for homemade bread and provolone. All that and more is waiting.

Someone was standing over me; but I could not hold the image of the face long enough to let it sharpen into focus.

'Mr. Innocente! Can you hear me?'

The meter was still ticking.

Yes, I wanted to say, yes I can hear you, but I felt my eyes closing, inexorably; felt the face and voice above me, the room, the world, slipping into darkness; felt an infinite sadness coming over me, the sadness of departures, goodbye, goodbye; and the small black box under the sink now gave out a little click and a whirr, and everything went black.

PART ONE

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All happy families are like one another; each unhappy family is unhappy in in its own way.

Leo Tolstoy

Anna Karenina

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I--VALLE DEL SOLE

As far as I know the village was never listed in any of the tourist guides. No culinary specialties, no holy sites, no famous church. Forgotten and unsung, one of a hundred villages just like it flung across those mediocre mountains like scattered stones. Imagine a place where history had not moved for a thousand years, where the wind still whistled around rough walls of hand-hewn rock and through streets of dung-stained cobblestones, and at night only the dying embers of a cooking fire or the flame of a candle held back the darkness.

The Samnites, fierce mountain people, had first settled the region, riding down from the north along the ridge-line of the Appenines on the great ox the gods had given them. They built imposing cities, Aquilonia, Bovianum, Cominium, which the Romans destroyed. Only the ruins remained now--roadside markers of forgotten import, the mossy foundations of a temple or shrine, the curved stone seats of a theatre--though these

were proudly tendered by local towns and villages as evidence of their ancient past.

But at Valle del Sole there were no ruins, and if the past of Samnium was preserved there it was in the large-boned bodies of the peasants, their rough features, the blood remembering two thousand years of parentage; in some quirk or inflection of language, a word or sound with no source in the conqueror's Latin, and betraying its Oscan past; in old rites which had survived the accretions of time, though their origins were now long forgotten. As the crow flew Valle del Sole was only a hundred miles from Rome, had been that close, near the dawn of time, to the centre of the world; but how long it had taken the new voices of that city, the cries of the martyrs, the ministries of Paul, to travel that hundred miles of raw hillside and bush there was no telling. Valle del Sole's requisite church--high stucco walls, bell tower, and spire--loomed over the village from an embankment, looking as old and solid as the rock face it stood on. But its long shadow, stretching across the village square, covered darker mysteries. Homes in Valle del Sole had goat horns fastened above the doorway, to guard against the evil eye.

I said that history had not moved--and yet, the villagers of Valle del Sole had a profound sense of history, felt in a personal way the line that carried them back to Rome, and to ancient Samnium; preserved in the stories passed down to them of the burning of a landlord's barns or the changing hands of a strip of land or the murder of a local *galantuomo* the memory of feudalism, of peasant rebellions, of the Risorgimento. Every stone of Valle del Sole had a history, every house its generations, every nook and cranny of field its long, remembered

pedigree, all these things as much a part of history as the sack of a city, or the fall of an empire. And in this village steeped in history, and lost to it, my own small story unfolded, it too caught up in larger forces which made themselves known to me only through a burnt-out building in the middle of a field, or a nick in a wall.

The Germans had been through during the war. In the same bed my mother and I shared in my grandfather's house two German soldiers had once spent the night. My grandfather showed me the chip in the bedroom wall where one of them had fired his rifle at a spider.

'You could hear the shot from here to Capracotta,' my grandfather said. 'They scared everyone in the village half out of their wits. But when I came up to see what had happened the two of them were rolling on the bed and laughing like madmen. "I've killed a spider!" one of them said, as if he'd just done the greatest thing in the world.

'After that I made your mother lock herself in the stable. She was just a young girl then, there's no telling what they might have done. Sometimes when the Germans passed through a village all the young girls disappeared, and never came back.'

But later my mother told me a secret.

'Don't believe all those stories your grandfather tells you,' she said. 'While your grandfather was sleeping those soldiers came down behind the stable to do their business, and I went out to talk to them. We had a nice walk in the pasture, under the moon.'

'Weren't you afraid they would take you away?' I said.

My mother laughed.

'They were just boys,' she said, 'not even seventeen. When I came

out of the stable and caught them with their little birds in their hands they turned as red as an apple. But then we had a nice talk. One of them spoke perfect Italian, like he was reading it from a book. He told me he wanted to be your father.'

But I didn't understand: I hadn't been born yet, during the war, wasn't born till several years after. My mother, though, only tweaked my nose and laughed at my confusion, explaining nothing.

So my own history, too, was being filled with the spectre of the past, the familiar and the everyday layered over with the strangeness of other lives and other times. Lying in bed at night, I sometimes thought I could see through the gauze curtains of the balcony doors the dim forms of those young soldiers who had lain where I lay. They were smoking cigarettes and talking in low whispers. The muzzles of their rifles rested against the balcony's steel rail, and sometimes the wind nudged them slightly, metal scraping against metal. The whispers went on for a long time, mingling with the wind, but it was only when the whispers stopped that my heart quickened and my palms began to sweat, and I moved up against my mother's breasts to lock my small arms around her neck.

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II--BELMONTE

My grandfather took me once, when I was five, to visit the town of Belmonte. We walked the whole way--up to the main road and along it as it slithered around the mountains, then up a zigzag that climbed to the
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top of a peak and into Belmonte. My memories from the trip are like small, sentimental oil paintings: woman with water jug, peasant with two donkeys, shepherd with flock. My grandfather called out by name to everyone we passed, making a quick gesture that was half wave and half salute.

My grandfather still had some shrapnel in his legs from the First World War. The shrapnel, along with three ribboned medals he kept in a velvet-lined leather case in his bedroom, had been earned through meritorious service. That service had also earned him a government pension, because it had left his legs gnarled and lame. One leg was a little shorter than the other--the bone in it had been crushed by a horse's hoof, and had never healed properly--and he walked now with a cane and with special shoes the cobbler in Rocca Secca made for him, one sole built up a few inches higher than the other. He walked with the stoop of someone much older than his sixty-odd years, and with the clenched jaw of someone in constant pain. Every once in a while one of those pieces of shrapnel floating around in his legs would brush against a nerve, and a grimace would flash across his face. If you asked my grandfather about the war, he would raise a pant leg and show you the awkward curve where a bone had refused to set, and the pits in his calf a grenade had made in some muddy field along the Austro-Hungarian border. Yet despite his stoop and his shuffling gait, my grandfather had a way of looming large: you got the sense around him that he was a man to be reckoned with.

In the village he was known simply as *lu podestà*, the mayor, because he had held that position unchallenged for almost twenty years.

If I had descended from him through a son rather than a daughter, that nickname would eventually have passed on to me--people in the village were seldom known by their surnames but by their *soprannomi*, bequeathed to them by a forefather or, in the case where there were many branches of the same family to be distinguished one from the other, earned by some mark of distinction or quirk of behaviour: there were the Scorzapulci, for instance, the Fleapeelers, so named because some great-great-grandfather had been caught in a pasture trying to pull the legs off of fleas; or the Macellai, the Butchers, who in the dark recesses of the past had murdered a brother-in-law for mistreating his wife. My grandfather had earned his own name, and unlike many of the others it was one to be proud of; but he had only a daughter as heir, and so no one who would carry on that name when he died.

The path which led up to Belmonte from the main road seemed as if it had been unused in years. The old ruts of donkey carts had been deepened into gullies by rain, and the centre of the path was overgrown with grass and weeds. My grandfather struggled up the steep incline while I walked slowly beside him. Near the top of the slope, cobblestones began appearing in the grassy road. By the roadside a loose pile of rocks, overgrown with weeds and moss and tangled vines and spotted with lizard droppings, revealed the outlines of an old building--a few half-standing walls, spaces for a door or a window. It was as if the building were slowly growing out of the earth, random rocks gradually arranging themselves into some kind of order.

'The Germans destroyed everything,' my grandfather said. 'We could hear the explosions all the way down in Valle del Sole. We thought it

was the end of the world.'

We had crested the peak and entered the village--Belmonte lay stretched out before us now. Buildings in various states of decay flanked the roadside--some just heaps of rubble, some with portions of wall still standing, others burnt out, their shells intact but their insides hollow as skulls, empty windows staring onto empty streets. Here and there a horn still jutted out defiantly from above a doorway; but the horns had failed to fulfill their purpose.

We walked through the deserted street, my grandfather's heavy shoes clicking against the weedy cobblestones, until we came to the square. Wide stone steps led up from the square to a building with a cross embedded in the cement above the doorway. The walls of the building were intact but the roof had caved in. A jagged projection at the back of the building must have been the remains of a bell tower.

'Even the church wasn't spared,' my grandfather said. 'People said the Germans didn't believe in God, but really they were just mad as hell, because they thought we had betrayed them.'

Across from the church the square fronted onto a cliff. My grandfather and I took a seat on a crumbling stone bench there and stared out onto the valley. The countryside looked unreal from that perspective because you could hold so much in your vision all at once--the mountains stretching away for miles, rising up rough and irregular from the valley floor; the fields spread over the mountains' slopes in endless patchwork; well-tended plots interspersed with craggy pasture and rocky waste. It was the end of June, and the fields which flanked the river at the bottom of the valley had already turned a golden brown. Harvest

times in that region varied with altitude: the wheat ripened in a slow wave which started in the valley and casually made its way up the slopes through the summer, like sunlight emerging from behind a cloud. Of the highest villages it was sometimes said that they harvested in September and planted in August, sowing their new crop between the stalks of the old.

'Do you see Valle del Sole?' my grandfather asked. He pointed to a cluster of houses in the distance spread out in three tiers along a slope. Just above the village sat the church, perched on its small cliff, its spire craning, like a mountain bird watching over her brood.

The village looked so different from a distance than it did when you were in the middle of it, a whole that was somehow less than the sum of its parts. It seemed so uniform, with its dirty tiled roofs and earth-coloured walls, like something that had simply sprung out of the mountain one day, fully formed. It was hard to reconcile this single image with the myriad images of Valle del Sole I had in my head--the hundred faces of a hundred different houses, each with its own variation, an extra storey, an outdoor stairway, a painted door; the changing views of the town's snaking streets, from the square, from the schoolhouse, from the stone bench in front of my grandfather's house; the strips of brightly-coloured plastic which hung in front of the doorway to Di Lucci's bar, to keep out the flies; the narrow steps leading up to the church; the dim rooms, smelling of must and smoke, which I shared with my mother and grandfather.

'It was a beautiful village once, Belmonte,' my grandfather was saying. 'The houses always painted and the cellars always full. Only a

young village--the first people had come here from Rocca Secca maybe a hundred years ago, to be closer to their fields--but they used to have the best festivals in the region. People here seemed to have better luck than other people, maybe because they had their fields on the south side of the mountain. They were always harvesting their wheat a month before Valle del Sole, though they should have been the last.'

I looked around the square and tried to imagine what Belmonte might have looked like before the war, children playing in the streets, the peasants with their donkey carts and goats, the shutters on the houses all painted and flowers growing out of clay pots on the balconies. But to me Belmonte looked exactly as it should, as if the destruction had not been random but part of some careful plan, each explosion calculated for precise effect; or as if these ruins, with their weathered, mossy forms, wild flowers creeping up though crevices, were not a falling away from some more ordered shape but shapes which had no past, which had always already lain latent in the solid rock.

'Did the Germans kill everyone when they came?' I asked.

'Maybe a few chickens,' my grandfather said. 'Someone had warned the people that the Germans were coming, so they hid in the mountains. During the war everyone had a place in the mountains where they kept a little food, to hide it from the soldiers. When the Germans passed on the way down, they were our friends, and when they passed on the way up they were our enemies. But to the villagers it was all the same--one way or the other the Germans had to eat.

'The Germans must have come to Belmonte because they thought it would make a good place to fight the Americans--from the top of a moun-

tain. But there was no fighting. After a few days, the Germans packed up and left, but not before they destroyed the village.

'When the villagers came out of the mountains and saw that even the church had been destroyed, they refused to rebuild their houses in the town, out of superstition. They said the envy of the other villages had sent the evil eye. Now the people of Belmonte are spread out all over the world. Some built new houses on the main road or went back to Rocca Secca, others went who knows where--Rome, America, Argentina. Nobody tends their fields now.'

My grandfather leaned forward on his cane and stood up, and we started our walk back through Belmonte to the main road. A crisp wind had sprung up, and was stirring the vines and weeds among the ruins and whistling through the hollow buildings.

'Ionno,' I said as we were passing out of the town, 'didn't the Germans come to Valle del Sole when they left Belmonte?'

'We thought they might,' my grandfather said. 'We ran into the mountains when we heard the explosions from Belmonte. But the Germans went right past us. They didn't stop again until they got to Rome.'

So Valle del Sole had been spared, passed over, some outstrectched wing protecting it from the Germans' rage; and the house I lived in, with its rough-hewn rafters and cool cement floor, its gauze curtains and thick-blanketed beds, had not been turned into charred ruins. Though I did not know then that preterition was a double-edged thing, that those passed over might not have been spared so much as simply forgotten, their fates too small to catch the eye of divine protectors.

III--GAMBELUNGHE

It was in the nature of Valle del Sole to be passed over, since it could not be simply passed *through*. The main street in the village, via San Giuseppe, came down a mile from the high road, carved a steep S through the town's centre, then ended at a 200 foot drop on the town's edge. A person had to have a reason to come into Valle del Sole; but the only thing that might draw a traveller down from the high road was the prospect of a drink at Di Lucci's bar, and better wine could be had at a better price only a few miles down the main road in either direction, in Castiluccì or Rocca Secca. The few visitors who came to Valle del Sole were former residents now living in Rome or Naples who made their yearly return in the summers, or for *la Festa della Madonna*; but mainly now the village knew only one-way departures.

'Every year we lose ten or fifteen families to America,' my grandfather would say. 'At the end of the war there were almost a thousand people in Valle del Sole. Now there's only half that number. Only babies and old people. No one left to work the land.'

But Valle del Sole, after all, had little to recommend it. The name itself was a misnomer--it expressed more a desire than a truth--since the town wasn't in a valley at all, but clung to the north face of a mountain about 4000 feet above the valley floor. *La Cassa per il Mezzogiorno*, the government agency which had been set up to deal with economic development in the poverty-stricken south, had not yet made its way to Valle del Sole, and so amenities like electricity, indoor plumbing, paved roads, telephones, were unknown there--water was fetched in

copper jugs from a communal fountain on the edge of town, and the needs of nature were met in the open fields, under the moon, with a mountain wind biting at your back. The villagers were almost all peasant farmers, *contadini*, and they teased what little bounty they could out of the region's tired, crusty soil; working from dawn till dusk on steep slopes and in rocky fields to garner the few pounds of grain they needed to last through the winter. The peasants of Valle del Sole felt toward the land as they might feel towards an old mule: they remembered its long years of service but still cursed its mute stubbornness, its refusal to yield despite all their cajoling and overtures. Every morning, though, the peasants were up before the sun to walk out to plots of land that were scattered piecemeal across the countryside, often miles from the village. Sometimes, to save on walking, they spent the night out in the open, cooking up a little cornmeal over an open fire and sleeping in the scanty shelter of a lean-to.

My grandfather had a story that explained the hard lot of Valle del Sole's peasants. He told it one evening on the terrace at Di Lucci's bar--children often gathered around him when he came up to Di Lucci's to hear his stories. Usually it was the stories we already knew by heart that we wanted to hear most--stories about the war, for instance--but every once in a while my grandfather would reach into his sack and pull out something completely new, like the story of Gambelunghe.

'A long time ago,' he started, rolling his gravel voice out from its usual tautness into the expansive rhythms of a storyteller, 'even before the time of the Romans, before Christ walked on earth or God talked to Moses, all this land around Valle del Sole was covered with jungle and

monkeys, like Africa. There were no mountains then, and no people for thousands of miles. Oh, it was beautiful in those days, with tall trees that reached up to the sky and the river a mile wide, and so strong that it didn't freeze in the winter. But,' and here my grandfather's voice dropped down to a hush as he leaned forward in his chair and eyed us ominously, 'it was dangerous, too, because of the wolves and the snakes.

'Then a great giant named Gambelunghe came out of the north, a man as tall as the trees. When Gambelunghe stood in the river the water barely covered his big toe, and he could take trees between his finger and thumb and zzahng! pull them right out of the ground, monkeys and all. Gambelunghe was a great farmer, so he decided to clear all the land in the area to plant his crops. So first he caught all the monkeys in a bag because they made too much noise with their laughing and shouting and he threw them all the way down to Abyssinia. And then the snakes, too, he took care of them--he dug a big pit and filled the bottom with apples, and when the snakes came to get the apples he crushed their heads between his fingers. Then he cleared away all the trees and ploughed the land with two oxen as high as the mount of Belmonte, and he planted his crops--a thousand hectares of grain, a thousand hectares of vineyards, a thousand hectares of olives, a thousand hectares of vegetables and a thousand hectares of pasture for his sheep. Then he built four barns to store the harvest, and a big stable for the sheep.'

'What about the wolves?' we all wanted to know. We had not forgotten the hushed voice, the ominous gleam in my grandfather's eye.

'Ah, yes, the wolves,' my grandfather said, nodding his head with sad foreboding. 'Gambelunghe forgot all about the wolves. And when

winter came he was so tired he stretched himself out in the fields and went to sleep. But one night, during a snowfall, the wolves came. When they saw that Gambelunghe was asleep they fell on him before he could move and tore him into a thousand pieces! Oh, it was a sight, the pieces spread from here to Capracotta, his big feet sticking up in the snow without any legs, his insides torn out of him like a chicken's, his head floating down the river to the sea like a big provolone. And when the wolves had finished their dirty business, and taken care of the big oxen too, they broke into the barns and ate until they could hardly move. Most of the wolves ate so much that they fell over and died. That was their reward for their evil.

"But in the spring a strange thing happened: the toes on Gambelunghe's feet, which had been frozen in the earth, started to grow! They grew and they grew through the spring and summer, and by harvest time you could see what they had grown into--five women on the left foot, and five men on the right. Not giants like Gambelunghe, but about the same size as people are nowadays.

"They had a rough winter because they had little to eat, and what little they had they had to fight the wolves for. But the next spring the five men married the five women and each man took one of Gambelunghe's fields--one for the grain, one for the vineyards, one for the olives, one for the vegetables and one for the sheep.

"Soon, though, jealousy broke out among them. The one with the sheep was jealous of the one with the grain, for though he had meat and wool he had no bread. The one with the grain was jealous of the one with the vineyards, for though he had bread he had no wine. And so on.

Meanwhile, the wives were always complaining to their husbands, saying that the other wives had an easier life, because of their better fortune. They told their husbands to steal from the others' stores. So fighting broke out, because so and so accused this one, and this one accused that one, and soon the noise from their arguments--because they shouted very loudly--reached up to heaven. And God, who had been sleeping, grew very angry.

"'So that is what you do with your good fortune,' God said to the *contadini*, and to punish them God caused the mountains and rocks to grow out of the ground, and made the soil tired and weak. Which is why farmers have to work so hard nowadays to make a living.

"After that the farmers had to make a plan to avoid *invidia*. So they divided each of the thousand hectares into equal portions, making sure no one got a portion that was worse than anyone else's, that had more rocks or was too far from the river. And when they had children they divided the land again, a piece here, a piece there, making sure everything was fair. Over many years the land became more and more divided. That is why a farmer now may have a hectare of land near *la fonte di Colle di Papa*, another on the other side of Belmonte, a third all the way over by the Valley of the Pigs. Maybe one section is rocky land and only good for pasture, another is a portion of his father's vineyards. It might take a farmer a whole day of walking just to visit all his pieces of land.'

On the night my grandfather told this story, I asked him, as we were walking home, 'Do you think it will ever be like it was before Gambelunghe again, with the jungle and the monkeys?'

'That was only a story,' my grandfather said, no longer the story-teller now but an old man who walked with a stoop. 'An old man like me is only good for telling stories. But don't believe all the stories people tell you.'

I don't think I understood, though, the distinction my grandfather was trying to make. His version of things, as far as I was concerned, fit all the facts, accounted for the ragged, stony countryside, for the far-flung fields, for the calloused hands of the villagers. I knew nothing of feudalism then, of the big landowners who had parcelled their lands out haphazardly, of the peasants who scrambled to buy what little they could, wherever they could, of the great upheavals of the nineteenth century. And the image which my grandfather had painted of that original jungle, before the days of division and strife, with its mile-high trees and mile-wide river, lodged itself in my head as something permanent and true, as if there had been a special place in my brain reserved precisely for that image, and only for it. I expanded on that early paradise in my imagination, taking out the wolves and snakes and adding strange, coloured birds, a few lions (tame ones), fruit trees of every kind, apples, pears, figs. And I began to feel a secret pleasure whenever another family left Valle del Sole for America, because maybe soon every last family but my own would have gone and the jungle would begin to creep over the land once again, restoring it to its original state of grace.

IV--FAMILY LIFE

Apart from my grandfather's position as mayor, my family enjoyed no particular distinction in Valle del Sole. We were a little better off than most, because of my grandfather's pension and the occasional remittances my mother received from my father, who had emigrated to America when I was small, and because my grandfather had inherited a sizeable vineyard and three hectares of olive trees, from which he collected rent, since he could not work them himself. My grandfather's own father had been to America--in fact he had perished there, under uncertain circumstances, but before that had managed to send back enough money to provide for his family's comfort. And since my grandfather's older brothers had died young, my grandfather had inherited much of the family's land, as well as a house which had been built with American dollars. My grandfather's wife had lost her first two children to flu and cholera before losing her own life giving birth to her third, my mother, and so there were only the three of us, and we lived fairly well, pasta three or four times a week instead of the usual beans or cornmeal, meat sometimes on Sundays, a wool mattress instead of burlap-covered straw.

But for all that our house, though built with American earnings, had the same bare stone walls as the other houses in Valle del Sole, the same uneven cement floors, the same blackened pot in the fireplace. Blood connected us to half the other families in the village--most directly to my grandfather's sister Lucia, his sole surviving sibling, who lived a few houses down from us with her spinster daughter Marta, and with whom we occasionally shared Sunday dinner; but also to the sons and

daughters of his three dead siblings, and to dozens of other families who intermarriage had joined us to in the dim recesses of history, the Danellos, the Maiales, the Catalones, the Di Mennas. And like them we were peasants, from a long line of peasants, with a history preserved only in the stories of scandals and intrigues the family had carried through the generations.

Every once in a while, through my grandfather or my mother, one of these stories filtered down to me, altered and amplified, no doubt, by the handling, but still more in the realm of the real than the mythic, the scenes of its unfolding still part of the everyday landscape. There was the story of my great-great-grandmother, for instance, who had given birth in a stable only a few doors down from our own--the father, my mother told me, had been her own older brother, and though I did not understand the exact meaning of this crime I could sense the horror of it, in the hushed voice my mother used in telling of it. The baby had come out, it was said, deformed and stillborn, though only the brother had been present at the birth, and it was never known for certain if he had not simply reached out in horror towards the product of his evil and wrapped his rough hands around its neck. In the ravine formed beside my grandfather's house by years of run-off from the *Fonte di Colle di Papa* was an ancient chestnut tree the brother had later hanged himself from; the ravine had been allowed to grow up around it unhindered, though my mother and I still collected fruit from it sometimes in the fall.

Every family had its stories like these. Mothers told them at night around a dying fire, as if they were secrets; but usually they were com-

mon knowledge among the other villagers, and thus served as a source of solidarity, each villager bound to the other by the knowledge of past scandals. And since Valle del Sole had always been, for as long as anyone could remember, a village of peasants, had never sported the palace of a baron or a count, did not have a class of artisans, or merchants--it relied on Rocca Secca to meet these needs--it had no clear hierarchy of caste to set the villagers against one another.

And yet, the small prerogatives remained: I was the grandson of the *podestà*, and I had a father in America. And though I had my chores to tend to, like the other children, the water to be fetched, the sheep to be tended, the garden behind the house to be hoed, I did not have to rise at four during harvest time to go out to the fields, spend a long day wielding a scythe or collecting straw into sheaves, come home in darkness with my limbs scarred and my body drained. I remember my childhood in Valle del Sole now as a time of almost aristocratic leisure: work was the outer edge of a world whose centre was all warmth and indolence, a warmth and indolence brought into being and secured, it seemed, held in place against all possible decenterings, by the constant reassuring presence of my mother.

My mother--she might have dropped into Valle del Sole from a cloud, so much did she seem to me to stand out from the other villagers, or been left there on a doorstep one early dawn by gypsies who had stolen her from the palace of a king or prince. I associated her with the exotic names I sometimes heard on the lips of the other villagers, when they told tales of travel and war and emigration--New York, Buenos Aires, Addis Ababa. She had only the standard grade four education,

like most of the other villagers--the public school in Valle del Sole only went that high, and my grandfather, though he could have afforded it, had probably not thought it worth the expense to send a daughter to the *media* school in Rocca Secca. And she busied herself in the same ways as other mothers--washed our clothes, either at the fountain or, in the dry season, when water was scarce, down at the river; baked our bread, in the oven built into one wall of the kitchen, with bricks from the fireplace used for heat; planted our garden in the spring, and fed us on it during the summer and fall. But my mother's hands, it seemed, were less calloused and hard than those of other mothers, her legs did not bulge with fat or with blue veins, her hair always flowed out long and smooth behind her, not cut back or tied up in a kerchief. And at night, in bed, when I lay beside her, her body smelt rich and fresh, free from the animal smells that seemed to always to linger around the other villagers. Her one sign of imperfection was the small scar she bore on her left cheek, memory of past violence, and the only hint that the private world we shared together might have a limit.

I can remember now the origins of that scar, though it's not clear to me if I remembered it at the time. My father emigrated to the New World when I was four. In my only memory of him from before he emigrated he is sitting at a table, a stocky, handsome man, short black hair slicked back, and face contorted in anger. We must have been living then in Castilucci, with my father's parents, since I have an image of them too, sitting sullen and stoop-shouldered in front of a fire that is dying out, the room growing dark around them. A few final flames from the fire are casting a glow on my father's face. My mother is

sitting across from him but she is already wrapped in shadows.

The next scene in this memory happens slowly. I see my father pick something off the table--a dish? a bowl?--and bring it back behind him with an arc of his arm before hurling it forward again; see the object drift across the table and then shatter against my mother's cheek. My grandparents rise and the last light from the fire reaches my mother's face, her lips formed into scream or soundless horror, her hand coming up to a place on her cheek where the colour of blood mixes now with the red flame from the fire.

My mother seldom talked about my father, though she told me once how she had met him. We were sitting on the stone bench in front of my grandfather's house, me holding the wool for her as she knitted, when Angelo Catalone, Alfreddo Catalone's son, came past us on his way into the village from the main road. He was on furlough from his army service, and immaculately dressed in pressed khakis and stiff cap and shoes that shone like glass.

'*Buon giorno, signora*,' he said, in a fruity Italian you never heard in Valle del Sole. He removed his cap with a little bow and sententious smile as he passed but did not break his stride.

'*Buon giorno, signor' Catalone*,' my mother responded, suppressing a laugh. 'How fine you look these days. The army has treated you well.' But when he had disappeared around the corner she broke out laughing in earnest.

'Your father was just like that,' she said to me, 'like a cock. The first time I met him was at the *Festa San Guiseppe* in Castilucci, and he was dressed up like that, and all the girls were making eyes at

him except me. He looked so silly--everything he was wearing was two sizes too small, as if someone had tried to put a pair of pants on an ox.

'But because I wasn't paying any attention to him, I was the first girl that he asked to dance, because he wanted to prove what a big man he was. And there we were, dancing *la tarantella*, him turning me around like a devil and sweating like a pig, when I heard a zzzzzzzzup, and your father turned as red as a tomato. He had split his pants, right down the middle.'

But it was rare for my mother to speak so openly of my father. Up to the time of my grandfather's death--my father's father, Vittorio Innocente, my namesake--we had still had some contact with my father's family in Castilucci, but since then a curtain had fallen between our two families. My grandfather, a violent, angry man, had died with two curses on his lips, one for my mother and one for my father, and that was not the kind of thing one easily forgot. We were visiting that day, my mother and I, for the Feast of St. Joseph, about a year after my father had left for the New World. We had gathered together for Sunday dinner, about twenty-five of us in all--my father had five siblings, all but one of them married--crammed in a hot, dim kitchen filled with smoke and babies' cries and the loud conversation of a large gathering. My grandmother, a short, almost dwarfish woman whose body had rounded with age into a small sphere, was rushing about the kitchen agonizing over every small detail of her meal--she was the sort of woman for whom the world always seemed on the verge of catastrophe, and forty-odd years of being bullied by my grandfather, caged within his anger and violence,

had given her the mixed wariness and volatility of a frightened animal. As she hovered around us now serving food and clearing dishes, refusing to join us at the table for fear of being remiss in her duties, still my grandfather could only hurl abuse at her, complaining about the meat, about the pasta, about her nervous fluttering.

'Stay still a moment!' he would shout, but then a minute later, '*Bè, brava*, you didn't even put any salt on the table, *stronza*.'

But it was not until the end of the meal that the argument started which would cost my grandfather his life. My uncle Pasquale and my uncle Umberto were discussing the uncertain prospects for that year's harvest--it was only the end of March, but a few heavy rains had washed away much of the wheat that had been seeded the previous fall.

'Mario'--my father--'was the only smart one,' Uncle Pasquale said finally. 'The rest of us will live like slaves the rest of our lives.'

With this comment my grandfather, who had been downing wine like water during the meal, suddenly came alive.

'Don't you have enough to eat?' he said. 'Didn't you always have enough to eat?'

My uncle Pasquale, my grandfather's first born but unlike him a slow, patient man, shrugged his shoulders.

'But what do you have after you've eaten?' he said, then poured a bit of salt into his hand and let it fall in grains onto the table. '*Cubello*. Nothing. Not enough to buy a whore in Rocca Secca.'

'Pasquà!' my grandmother said. 'Is that any way to speak to your father? Can't you see you're making him angry?'

'Keep quiet, you!' my grandfather shouted. 'Like a chicken!' Then,

back to my uncle, flushed now with an old and bitter anger: 'Do you think your brother did a good thing to go against his own father? Answer me that, *cretino*! Yes, that's the way people think now. America! Go! Go! All of you! Do you think your brother is living like a king in America? Do you know where he's living? He's living in a chicken coop! A goddamned chicken coop, *per l'amore di Cristo*. Meanwhile he leaves his wife to run around like a whore!'

In an instant, the room went silent, even the gurgles and cries of my aunts' babies dying down in confusion. My mother, who had not spoken a word through this conversation, suddenly stiffened beside me, her arm freezing in mid-action as it brought a bit of meat to her mouth. She set down her fork, and after a pause she rose from her chair.

'I'm going for a walk,' she said, tonelessly; and as she walked out of the room everyone stared awkwardly away from her. My grandfather, meanwhile, had been silenced by his own words; he looked down at his dirty plate now, scowling, then took another draught of wine, wiped at his mouth with the back of his arm, and spit onto the floor. But shortly, in the charged silence left behind by my mother's departure, he began to mumble again, as if reciting an incantation, 'In a chicken coop. In a goddamned chicken coop, *porco dio*.' And it took only a moment for him to work up his anger again, as if he was anxious to show that he did not care what anyone thought of his outburst.

'A man leaves his family to go live in a chicken coop,' he said. '*Bravo*.' That's what I raised my children for, to send them off to the four corners of the earth, because the life I gave them wasn't good enough for them. Fine. Go, all of you, and join your brother. But if

you do, don't ever set foot in my house again! Every stone of this house was laid with the blood and sweat of my fathers, but now no one thinks of their father, because they think they are better than him. Your brother is an idiot! May he rot in America!'

'Vittorio!' my grandmother blurted out. 'Your own son!'

But now, finding a ready object for his anger, my grandfather wheeled around suddenly on his chair and with a curse rose up and grabbed a fire poker that was leaning on the wall behind him, his face hot with anger. He moved so quickly that the rest of us only stared on dumbfounded, my grandmother letting out a shriek and raising up her arms to shield herself from the blow. But the blow never came: with the poker stretching now all the way to the ceiling, a look of shock came over my grandfather's face--his eyes opened wide and his jaw dropped--and a second later his body lurched forward and he collapsed onto the stone floor, the poker still clutched in one hand and his face, turned up to one side, still frozen ghostly white in that wide-eyed, open-mouthed look of shock.

How my father reacted to his father's death, or the circumstances surrounding it, I didn't know. He did not, of course, attend the funeral--bodies, by law, had to be buried within twenty-four hours of death--and there would have been little point in his returning after it, what with the time and expense. But I remembered well the curse my grandfather had laid on him, and on my mother too--though I did not know what a whore was, or how it was that she ran around like one--and remembered also that final look of death on my grandfather's face, its spectre coming many times to haunt my dreams. And I was grateful, now, that we

had little to do anymore with my father's side of the family.

What contact we had with my father's world now came from the letters that arrived from him every few months; but my mother never read these letters out to me, and if I asked her what he'd said, she would make a joke of it.

'He said that he loves you and that you should be a good boy.'

'Is that all he said?'

'He said that I should be a good girl.'

'Did he say he loved you too?'

My mother would laugh.

'What a silly question. Of course he loves me.'

To these letters my mother would scribble off hurried responses, which she also never shared with me. She'd sit at the kitchen table after supper, her lips pursed together in concentration, and her pen circling over a page in preliminary overtures for a long time before finally a quick spurt of words would come out of her, and she would pause again. It was strange to see my mother go through this trial, these hesitations, because in speech she was all flow and confidence. When she had finished she would quickly seal the letter in an envelope, and send it off with me to the mailbox at Di Lucci's bar.

When I started grade one and began learning to read, I retrieved one of my father's letters once from the fireplace, where my mother had discarded it, and took it out to a back pasture with me when I went to tend the sheep. But it was no use: my father's handwriting did not resemble at all the shapes the teacher had been teaching us, was more look a series of homogenized loops, all the letters levelled into the same shape,

all the words running into each other, with no punctuation to help in the decoding. I stared at the writing until my eyes watered and my head spun, but still I couldn't make out more than a word or two; though what message I hoped or feared I might find in it, I didn't know.

I had a recurring dream in those days, up till the time I left Valle del Sole, in which my mother and I stepped out of a small, windowless booth into a dimly lit circular tunnel with smooth walls of polished stone. We would begin to make our way around the tunnel, until a black-haired ogre came out of the shadows and frightened us back into the booth, with grimaces and wild gestures. The ogre, I knew, was guarding an exit; but through the many nights on which my mind played this dream out, my mother and I never discovered it. I did not make the connection, then, between the ogre and my black-haired father, though surely some vague dread of my father produced these visions; but in my waking hours this dread never formulated itself clearly in my head, was mingled always with other feelings--pride, perhaps, and guilt. Though I could not then have picked out one emotion from another, and in the balance of them I felt finally only a vigilant contentment, glad in a way to have a father, but never hoping for his return.

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V--SHADOWS ON THE WALL

The spring before I turned six, my mother took me for a walk down to the river. It was a few days after a heavy rain, and the river was swollen from the water it had collected from the mountains. The rain had come after almost a month of drought, so that a thick carpet of green had sprung up almost overnight over the slopes. Everywhere young blades of wheat, having bided their time through the winter, were now mingling freely in the sun and breeze, green and expectant.

We walked slowly at first, hand in hand, along dirt paths beaten hard by farmers and goats. Though my palm was sweating in my mother's hand, the air was lettuce crisp, and so clear that the world seemed encased in glass, everything sharp and magnified, trees and rocks and circling sparrows standing against a background of slope and sky like essences of themselves, so finely did the air etch them out. Seeing the river grown so wide from the run-off and the fields grown so suddenly green made me think of Gambelunghe, of the days when all the land had been flat, unpeopled jungle.

'Let's run,' my mother said suddenly. She let go my hand and moved away from me, picking up speed, her cotton frock billowing behind her in the wind, catching the shape of her thighs as she leapt down the slope.

'*Vieni*, Vittorio!' she cried out, looking back over her shoulder, and I began to run after her, the extra pull of the slope making me feel unnaturally light, as if I had only to gather enough speed before I would lift off the ground, and fly.

But the distance between my mother and me was slowly widening; my

short limbs could not cover space as quickly as her own, and my mother receded from me down the slope, shrinking smaller and smaller. Now the lightness I felt began to turn to panic: I was no longer in control, it was not I who would lift off from the ground but the ground which would fall away from me, leave me hanging in empty space.

'*Mamma, non posso!*' I shouted out finally, short of breath, on the verge of tears, the pounding of my feet and heart echoing in my brain. But still she kept running.

'Mamma, wait for me!' But my voice was not reaching her; the wind was blowing it back down my throat. Now my head was swimming, the world rushing past me in a blur. My mother had gotten way ahead of me, had disappeared around a curve. I wanted to stop and shout out to her, but was afraid to break my stride, afraid the slope would take over then and I would tumble downwards helplessly. But when I rounded the curve the land levelled out, and there was my mother sitting not far down the path on a rock, legs apart, hands on her knees, chest heaving. I ran into her arms and burst into tears.

'What are you crying about?' she said, pulling me away from her. 'What kind of a man are you?'

'I thought you were running away from me,' I said.

My mother laughed.

'What a silly *ciuco* you are,' she said. She bent towards me and kissed each of my eyes, then kissed me casually on the lips before pulling away again. She tasted salty: a thin film of sweat had formed on the down above her upper lip.

'Come,' she said, standing, 'you can hold my hand so I don't get

away.'

By the time we got to the river my tears had dried, and my mother and I were laughing and joking again. We waded for a while at the river's edge, splashing each other with the murky grey water, and moving towards a set of rapids where large boulders stretched across the river like a natural bridge. The boulders were nearly submerged because of the recent rain, and the current was swift, the water frothing as it wrapped itself around the rocks.

'Don't be afraid,' my mother said, climbing onto the first rock, shoes in hand, then crouching down to help pull me up after her. 'I used to cross on these rocks all the time when I was your age. Just follow my footsteps.'

In retrospect there seems something slightly lax about a mother who would lead her five-year-old son across slippery rocks in a rushing current. I have an image of me leaping across huge chasms between the rocks, the water swirling darkly beneath me; of landing precariously on one foot, losing my balance, and toppling backwards into the swift current; of my mother standing on the rocks, arms akimbo, watching the river carry me off towards the sea, and laughing.

'*Ma dove vai*, Vittorio!' she's shouting. '*Ciao*, Vittorio! *Ciao*! *Arrivederci*!'

But my mother often treated me more like a schoolmate than a child--once or twice we had had contests climbing the chestnut tree behind my grandfather's house, to see who could get highest in its tangled limbs; and when we walked together in the fields she would sometimes lead me clandestinely into a farmer's orchard, and we would spend an hour feast-

ing on stolen apples. And the rocks at the crossing formed so orderly a crossing that they might have been placed there on purpose, by local farmers or by the ancient Samnites themselves, for easy passage when the water was running high. At any rate it was not I but my mother who fell into the water that day, slipping on a patch of moss and sliding down the side of a rock with a little exclamation of surprise, her arms shooting upwards and her sandals flying out of her hand and into the current. She landed in an awkward half-sitting position, the rushing water threatening for a moment to submerge her, as I looked on in panic; but in a few seconds she had managed to right herself , and now the water only came up to her knees. Her dress, though, was dripping wet, and clung to her thighs and stomach, translucent.

'*Addio*!' she said, looking towards her shoes, which had cleared the rapids and were floating away downstream. 'I paid *un occhio* for those shoes in Rocca Secca. Now I'll have to go around barefoot, like a gypsy.'

She climbed back onto the rock she'd fallen from and bent to wring some of the water out of her dress.

'Some guide I am, eh?' she said, laughing. 'If you'd followed me we'd both be half way to the Adriatic by now, with the fish chewing at our feet for lunch.'

'Fish don't eat people,' I said.

'Some fish do,' my mother said. 'The sea is full of them. Some of them are as big as a house. One day we'll go to the sea and I'll show you.'

When we set off across the rocks again, I noticed that my mother's

watery footprints were leaving behind traces of red.

'*Hamma*,' I said. 'You're bleeding.'

My mother looked back and I pointed to her footsteps. She stopped and sat down on a rock, letting one leg dangle in the water while she brought the other up towards her face. There was a watery patch of scarlet near her big toe.

'You're right,' she said. 'Anyways it's nothing serious, I didn't feel a thing. Later you can kiss it and make it better.'

It was funny how my mother could be so impervious to pain sometimes. I had seen her occasionally pulling hot bricks out of the fireplace with her bare hands without so much as wincing, when she couldn't be bothered to fumble with the tongs, and lifting them in one quick motion into the bread oven. And my grandfather had told me about the trials she had quietly endured during the time of my own birth. 'You didn't want to come out,' he'd told me. 'You were two weeks late and every morning your mother would go into labour. But then, for some reason, it would stop. In the afternoon your mother would go over to the neighbour's for a glass of wine. Then, the morning you were born, it took almost two hours for the midwife to get you out. Your mother never made a sound. The midwife thought she had fallen asleep.'

When my mother and I were safely across the river I put on my shoes and my mother led me down a path that followed the wall of a cliff a few dozen yards from the river's shore. The path looked like it hadn't been used in years. Tufts of grass and dandelion had sprouted up in the hard earth, and tall dead weeds from the winter encroached on either side. Though shoeless now my mother walked quickly, the dead weeds rustling

agai nst her dress, whi ch had al ready begun to dry i n the sun and breeze. Sometimes a branch from a low shrub would cut across the path, and she'd snap it away or stop to hold it so it didn't slap back in my face as I came up behind her.

When we had walked for about ten minutes we came to a large opening that receded into darkness in the cliff wall. Its mouth was so evenly formed that it might have been dug by human hands; but there were no signs of any recent human presence, weeds grown up all around the entranceway and the dirt thick with humus. A small stream, though, flowed out from the cave in the direction of the river, as if it had somehow burrowed itself into the mountain like a worm. Wisps of vapour were rising up from the stream's surface.

'It's a hot spring,' my mother said. 'Warm water coming out of the ground. I used to come bathing here when I was a girl.'

I followed her into the cave. It went back about twenty feet into the cliff wall, the ceiling tapering gradually down to meet the floor. The air was a bit stale and strange, and it took a moment to become used to the moist darkness after the brightness of the sun, but there was enough light filtering in from the cave's mouth to see clearly. In the shadows at the back of the cave toothy shapes stretched down from the ceiling and rose up from the floor, some of them joining together to form silvery pillars.

'The water made this cave,' my mother said. 'Look how it's coming up out of the ground.'

We were standing on a ledge of smooth stone that opened onto a large pool of water. Even in the dim light I could see down to the pool's

sandy bottom. A bubbling motion in the centre of the pool showed where water was rising up from the earth. I looked around at the walls of the cave, amazed that that slow bubbling could have carved this hole out of the earth, working away silently without any need for the noise and sweat of people. There was something furtive about being here, now, to watch. But someone, at least, had been there before us: my eye spotted, wedged between a rock and the wall, something that looked like a pair of glasses.

'Look,' I said, going over to pick them up. They were tinted, the sort I had sometimes seen at the market at Rocca Secca. I put them on my nose--they were cold and damp against my skin, and through them the cave became almost impenetrably dark.

'Can I keep them?' I said. But my mother came over and pulled them away.

'They're too big for you,' she said. 'And they're not good for your eyes.' She slipped the glasses into a pocket of her dress. 'Come and feel how warm the water is.'

She went back to the pool and crouched down to put one hand into it. Later, I knew, I could get the glasses from her if I tried, so now I forgot about them and knelt down beside her. The bubbling motion in the pool's centre gave the impression that the water was boiling, but when I put my hand into it I found it was only pleasantly warm, like the water my mother heated for my bath in winter.

'How does the water get hot?' I said.

'I don't know. Maybe the devil himself heats it up.'

She scooped up a palmful of water and splashed it in my face.

'Take your clothes off,' she said. 'It seems like you haven't had a bath since the last war. You're starting to smell like a goat.'

My mother pulled on my sleeves as I struggled to get out of my sweater, then reached down and peeled my undershirt off my back while I held my arms in the air. My pants and underwear I managed on my own. I stood for a moment stark naked in the dim light, shivering slightly, the little bird between my legs shrivelled and small from the coolness.

'Jump in,' my mother said, patting her hand on my behind with a little thwack. I did, scrunching my body into a ball and feeling the warm water wrap me up like a blanket as I sank down to the pool's sandy bottom. I held myself down for a few seconds, just over the spot where water was pulsing up from the earth; then, running out of breath, I sprang upwards, my head and shoulders shooting up above the surface of the water.

But when I turned to my mother to express my gladness at the wet warmth my words died on my lips. She was still standing over me on the ledge, but her arms were folded across her breasts and her fingers were resting where they had just pushed the cloth of her dress off her shoulders. The dress was falling, tumbling downwards like a cloud, like a gauze curtain, interminably slow, to reveal inch by inch the tan lustre of her skin, her complete and utter nakedness, for she had been wearing nothing underneath. Though we shared a bed together, it was the first time I had even seen her completely naked.

My mother stood over me only a few seconds before lowering herself into the pool, but that image of her standing there, etched out by the light from the cave's mouth, is the clearest memory I retain from

childhood of what she looked like, as if all my other memories were shadows and this the only true one. Even at that age I had a sense of the rightness of her, whether out of a fledgling sense of beauty or from some memory I retained, from when my soul had lived among the forms, because I had not drunk my fill when crossing back on the Styx. And yet in a way my mother's nakedness had revealed no real surprises--it was as if a snake had simply peeled back its skin, unveiling only the sleekness you had been led to expect.

It's strange, though, that I can remember nothing of what happened after my mother stepped into the water--it's not a complete blank, I can hear splashing, can see shadows on the wall. But the next clear image I have is of my mother and me walking along the path by the cliff, and my mother saying, 'Don't tell anyone about this place. It'll be our secret.'

For the trip back I succeeded in wresting the tinted glasses from my mother, though she said I could not wear them once we got to Valle del Sole, because people would think I was being boastful. So we made our way back down the path, my mother leading the way again, and me seeing the world from a new perspective, everything tinted blue, my head swimming from the strangeness of it. But while we were crossing the river, I stopped to take a drink, crouching down on a rock and dipping my hand into the stream. I'd brought one handful of river water to my mouth and was bringing a second one up when my elbow was jolted. The water spilled, and my glasses fell off my nose into the current.

'*Cretino*,' my mother said, standing over me. 'Don't drink that water. The sheep and cows shit in it.'

'My glasses,' I said, watching them being carried away by the current before they disappeared finally amidst some rocks. 'I have to get the glasses back.'

'Forget about the glasses. Come on, I'll buy you a *gazzosa* at Di Lucci's when we get home.'

She pulled me up by the armpits and sent me ahead of her, then took my hand when we were safely across and led me up the winding path to Valle del Sole.

VI--SIGNS AND WONDERS

Valle del Sole's naked, one-room schoolhouse sat up on the embankment above the square, just next to the church, at the top of a long flight of crooked stone steps. The teacher, who we knew simply as *la maestra*, was an imposing woman with the big-boned stockiness of her native Rocca Secca and with breasts that jutted out like a mountain face. By midday her blouses were always stained under the arms with great round patches of sweat, and when she leaned over you to correct your exercise book her body gave off a strong odour of garlic and perfumed soap.

But the teacher had her romantic side. Every day just after math we had our religion lesson, and la maestra, who was up on her hagiography, liked to tell us the lives of the saints. Italy, blessed among nations, had produced a healthy complement of them over the ages.

'And most of the saints,' the teacher told us, 'came from poor peasant families like you. Who knows if there isn't a saint among us right now?'

For la maestra, saints were not part of some mythical past. I think she kept a constant vigil, expecting that any day one might turn up on her doorstep begging for alms, hands bearing the marks of Christ.

'Santa Gemma,' she said, 'was alive when your grandfathers were boys. She was a poor orphan from a small village like Valle del Sole. The Lord came to her and gave her the marks from the cross on her hands and feet, just like St. Francis. But even the priests refused to believe she was a saint, because people are very jealous and don't like to think that anyone is better than they are. Then one day the priest came to see her and found her praying for a sinner from the town. And after she had finished praying that very man came to the house and threw himself at the priest's feet, begging for forgiveness. That's when they knew she was a saint.'

Until I'd started hearing these stories from la maestra, I don't think religion had ever really taken a hold of my imagination. My mother, certainly, had never made an issue of it. She attended church every Sunday with my grandfather and me, shared the front pew, which had been reserved for my grandfather because of his position in the town; but though even I, by the age of six, had memorized some of the meaningless Latin responses and spoke them out in *alto voce*, my mother never even bothered to move her lips.

'I say them in my head,' she told me when I asked her about this. 'God can hear what you're thinking.'

My grandfather, at least, liked to sing the hymns. You could always make out his voice above the rest, trembling slightly, on the verge of cracking but holding back from the edge through some act of tremendous restraint. Sometimes, when we sang an especially plaintive tune, my grandfather's voice sounded like the wails of old women at funerals, and I half expected to look up at him and see tears streaming down his cheeks. But his face never lost its crusty composure. If you could have followed that voice, though, into the dark chambers it came from, who knows what ravages or riches you might have found there.

But as far as my religious education went, my grandfather's role was ambiguous.

'My grandfather used to read the bible,' he told me once. 'It drove him crazy. Before he died he used to see angels coming down on the clouds to get him. That's what happens when you believe all those old stories.'

This warning, though, was not enough to save me from la maestra's spell. I thought a lot about the stories she told us, trying to fit the lives of the saints to the pattern of my own--the purity of heart, the saintly glow, the unflinching journey along the path of righteousness. I began to worry that I had inherited, somehow, my great-great-grandfather's madness: sometimes in class my mind would drift off and I'd have visions, like him, of bright-winged angels, see them coming into the room in the middle of the teacher's geography lesson to lead me away in glory, while my classmates stared on in silent awe.

And yet--didn't goodness come naturally to a true heart? Didn't it fill your being with a golden light, seep out through your very pores,

make your body tingle with its soft, narcotic warmth? And in that state who could think of sinning, what place would be left for the darker desires, all of them chased away like big, fat-bellied flies, to rot in the heat of a summer sun. But somehow things didn't work out that way for me--it seemed it was possible to entertain the purest intentions and still find myself caught in a pool of iniquity that merely sucked me in deeper the more I tried to struggle free, so that already by the tender age of six, having only recently stepped from that wide, sure land of early-childhood innocence, I found myself up to the neck in the muck and mire of sin.

Catalogue of Sins, Real and Imagined:

1. Fabrizio, though a year older than I was, stood a little shorter, and swaggered. His toes, knees, and belly pointed outwards when he walked, his nose and chin upwards. He was never without his cap--a brown corduroy thing he wore well back on his head, to keep his eyes out of the shadows--except in school and in church. He had two pairs of knickers, one blue and one green, which underwent a bimonthly rotation, like phases of the moon: two weeks blue, two weeks green, and so on through the year, even in winter, when he came to school with his bare calves white and goose-pimpled from the cold, though he didn't alter his swagger. Whenever he saw me on the streets of Valle del Sole, he called out, 'Ho, Vittò!' in a husky bass and patted his protruding belly, mimicking the bonhomie with which the men of the village often greeted each other when they passed on the street, as if nothing could be more amusing than the way adults carried on in that upper world of theirs. And yet this elfin child, with his scrawny arms and tousled hair, was an

agent of the devil.

First sin: to have allied myself with Satan's agents.

My intimacy with Fabrizio began in the first month of school. I was tending the sheep in the pasture some ways behind my grandfather's house when Fabrizio came sauntering across the fields. The sheep had found a nice patch of grass to keep them busy, so I was sitting on a rock, slashing at some weeds with my sheep stick. I had seen Fabrizio coming, but hadn't given much thought to what that might mean. In a village the size of Valle del Sole it wasn't hard to know all the kids your own age; but though I sometimes played in the street with some of the other children, I can't remember a single regular playmate I had at the time. Fabrizio I knew by name and family--he was the son of Luigi Abruzesse, who lived in the poorer section of town, on the little sidestreet via Giovanni Battista, and who everyone called Facciabrutta, Ugly face, a name he had inherited from his father but which suited his own scowling dourness well. But despite Fabrizio's parentage I'd always thought of him as more popular than I was, someone who moved with the gangs, those coteries that formed without consulting me, as if they had secret meetings in the night.

Fabrizio came up to me without speaking, and sat down in the grass as if I had been expecting him. We sat for a long time in silence, me swishing and him chewing on a stick of grass.

'My father doesn't let me tend the sheep anymore,' he said finally. 'Last week one of the sheep fell over a cliff. My father was angry as hell. Pom!' He made a quick arc through the air with his hand, to mimic a blow, then lifted his shirt out of his knickers to show me his

back. It was covered with purple welts.

'Not bad, eh? He hit me fifteen times with his belt. I counted in my head, to keep myself from crying. Then I said, "Now I'm just like Christ," because they hit him too, before they nailed him to the cross. When I said that my father started hitting me again. If you don't cry it makes them angrier, so I started crying to make him stop. Then my mother said, "*Basta*, Luì, you're going to make him into a cripple!"'

I kept swishing at my weeds. No one had ever laid a hand on me before. Fabrizio picked up a clump of dirt and threw it at one of the smaller sheep, sending it scurrying off in confusion.

'Do you smoke?' he said. He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out two crumpled filterless cigarettes. One of them he held out to me, making a gesture towards me with his chin. I set down my sheep stick and took the cigarette in my sweaty palm. Fabrizio took out a match, struck it against a stone, and lit his cigarette. Then held up the flame to me, shielding it with his palm.

'Put it in your mouth and suck on it,' he said, his own cigarette dangling now from the side of his mouth.

I did as he told me, holding the cigarette awkwardly between thumb and forefinger. But when the smoke bit into my throat my lungs suddenly rebelled, and I began coughing violently.

'You have to get used to it,' Fabrizio said, as my coughing subsided, 'but then it's easy.'

Hence my first cigarette. By the end of it little wisps of smoke were passing without resistance into my little lungs, and the sheep had started orbiting slowly around the rock I was sitting on. I slid off my

rock and into the cool grass, and Fabrizio and I spent the next half hour or so rolling and wrestling in the meadow, laughing because sheep fell off cliffs, because fathers beat their sons, and because the world, for all its seeming stability, was actually spinning around at tremendous speeds, which only became apparent after you'd had a smoke.

2. What was once a vice was now a habit.

La maestra, who played such an important role in moulding my imagination to fit the forms of religion, was also the source of my greatest sinfulness. Near the beginning of the year, while instructing us on sins suitable for confession, the teacher told us: 'You should tell the priest if you ever walk around in your underwear or naked in front of other people.' Thereafter, evil thoughts invaded me. La maestra always stood at the schoolhouse doorway in the morning to welcome us into class, arms crossed over her breasts, face registering what place we held in her affections--sweet smiles for well-behaved girls and timid boys, stern glances for tomboys and ruffians--while we squeezed past her with averted eyes and mumbled our morning greeting. But now, with the first glimpse I had of her standing there as I came across the church square, breathless from my walk up the steps, a strange and terrible thing happened: I had an image, suddenly, of la maestra standing stark naked, her wavy hair falling onto fleshy white shoulders, her crossed arms pressing pink breasts against her chest, and, pulsing like a heart, a dark mound growing out from between her legs. This vision, which forced itself all the more surely into my head the more I tried to suppress it, filled me with excitement and horror, and I paid for it every week with five Hail Marys, whispered surreptitiously as I sat beside my

mother at Sunday mass.

But the Hail Marys didn't help: every day it was the same thing, and it got to the point where it was torture to enter the classroom in the morning, to squeeze past the teacher's belly when only a moment before I had had that awful image of her. Sometimes I was so flustered and ashamed that I rushed past her and forgot to mumble my morning greeting. Then the teacher's heavy hand would fall on my collar and she would haul me back to the door.

'Were you born in a stable? Go back outside and come in again, properly this time.'

It was Fabrizio, finally, who saved me from this daily trial. He didn't attend school very often. I thought at first this was because his parents kept him at home to work, a common practice in Valle del Sole. But one morning when I got up to the top of the steps on my way to shool I saw him standing against the wall of the church as if he was waiting for someone. When he saw me he made a gesture with his head for me to come join him. La maestra had not seen me yet--you had to cross the church square before you came into her line of sight.

'I stole some cigarettes off my father,' Fabrizio whispered as I came up to him. 'Let's go up to Colle di Papa.'

I hesitated. I did not think that skipping classes would be a point in my favour in my apprenticeship for sainthood. But then I thought of la maestra waiting in potential nakedness on the other side of the church.

'What if someone finds out?' I said.

'I do it all the time,' Fabrizio said. 'No one will know.'

So began an almost daily ritual. Every morning Fabrizio or I, whoever arrived first, would wait against the wall of the church for the other to arrive, and if Fabrizio had been successful in stealing some cigarettes the two of us would make off up a shaded path behind the church to the top of Colle di Papa. It only took a few minutes to smoke the cigarettes, but we needed that excuse before we would skip class. We would spend the rest of the morning talking or roaming around. Usually we stayed close enough to the schoolhouse to be able to hear the shouts of the other children when school let out around one, so we would know when to go home.

One morning, though, an unseasonably warm morning in early December, Fabrizio thought it would be funny to hide outside the schoolhouse and listen to what was going on inside. We waited until we were sure la maestra had left her place at the doorway and then we slipped behind the schoolhouse and sat down in the dirt under a partly-opened window. We could hear the teacher talking only a few feet away from us, leading the class in morning prayer.

'*Nel nome del Padre e del Figlio e dello Spirito Sancto--*'

Fabrizio made a sign of the cross and ended by cupping his hand over his genitals. Then he pulled two cigarettes out of his shirt pocket.

'*Padre nostro, che sei nei cieli, sia santificato il tuo nome.*'

'But won't she smell the smoke?' I whispered to Fabrizio.

Fabrizio shrugged.

'*Venga il tuo regno, sia fatta la tua volonta, come in cielo cosi in terra.*'

Fabrizio took out his pack of *fiammiferi* and lit up our cigar-

ettes.

'Dacci oggi il nostro pane quotidiano, e rimetti a noi i nostri debiti come noi li rimettiamo ai nostri debitori.'

Fabrizio took a long drag off his cigarete and blew the smoke up into the air. I took a more cautious puff off my own, brought my hand up to my mouth to suppress a cough, then blew the smoke into my armpit.

'Non ci indurre in tentazione, ma liberaci dal male--' The teacher's heavy voice dropped out suddenly on *male*, and the confused and discordant 'Amen' of leaderless children reached us through the open window as Fabrizio and I looked up to see la maestra towering over us in all her buxom righteousness.

That afternoon la maestra paid a visit to our respective homes before returning to Rocca Secca. When she arrived at mine we were just finishing lunch. She came into the room stiff-backed and formal, conscious of her prerogatives as a Rocca Seccan and as a professional. A painfully long time seemed to pass with the usual courtesies, offers of food and wine, inquiries about health and family. I, meanwhile, sat frozen in my chair, unable to look the teacher in the eye, though conscious that she was sending stern glances in my direction.

But when the matter finally came out, my mother only laughed.

'My Vittorio? And—I thought he was so shy!' She seemed almost proud of me. I saw my grandfather glance at her sharply at this, and look as he was about to speak, but finally he only grimaced and turned away to spit into the fire.

'He's only bored, that's all,' my mother said. 'Sitting in that classroom all day.'

The teacher seemed to take this as an insult, because she got up from her chair in a huff.

'Well if that's the attitude *la signora* wants to take--' But she did not finish her threat, and left with only a curt good afternoon. After the horrors I had imagined awaited me, I was left a little disappointed by my mother's reaction. I was even somewhat envious when the next day Fabrizio showed me the expected welts on his back.

And so, after a week of contrition, I again began to join Fabrizio on his romps on the mountain. By this time my visions of la maestra *tutta nuda* had ceased, as suddenly as they had begun, leaving me without excuse for my sinful behaviour. But I had figured Fabrizio wrong.. In fact he was a drifter, as I could see as soon as I started spending time with him. He moved through the streets from this group to that, serving as a ringleader for a few hours, and then saying to me suddenly, in the middle of some game or exploit, 'Come on, let's go,' and the two of us would walk out to some pasture and lie in the grass for a few hours, or go down to the river and wade along the shore. He could insinuate himself into a group and change the whole course of its activities in a matter of minutes, have everyone following him to explore some abandoned shack on Colle di Papa or to raid a vineyard in the Valley of the Pigs, but then he would be gone, and no one would call out to him, 'Hey, Fabrizio!' or come looking for him at his house. He liked to get into fights which, since he wasn't very big, he didn't win very often. But he would pick himself up off the ground, wipe off his knickers, and walk away as if nothing had happened.

Why he attached himself to me I don't know, but I do think I was

chosen in some way, on that first day in the pasture. And while the saints in my head whispered lines from the *Padre Nostro*, there was hapless Fabrizio down the street shouting 'Ho, Vittò!' in his helpless, hopeless crescendo.

3. Father Niccolo, the village priest, used to visit our class once a week or so, to test us on our catechism. Fabrizio and I liked to avoid these visits, since the priest carried a short paddle with which he administered three whacks to the buttocks--one for the Father, one for the Son, one for the Holy Ghost--for every incorrect answer. But since Father Nick came randomly and unannounced it was impossible to anticipate his visits. He would simply appear the school doorway one day, like an Angel of Death, his black robes flowing to the floor, his collar tightly buttoned around his thick neck, his fat face flushed, and his paddle held discreetly behind his back. Immediately all whispers, hair pulling, note passing, and paper throwing would cease (la maestra was by no means as strict a disciplinarian as the priest), the air would resound briefly with the noise of wooden benches and chairs scraping against concrete, and then, benches and chairs aligned in perfect columns, students standing beside them, evenly spaced, eyes forward, a burnished silence would descend on the room and a thin sour smile would stretch across Father Niccolo's fat sour face.

'Buon giorno, ragazzi.'

'Buon gior-no Don Ni-cco-lo.'

Father Nick would circulate around the room as we sat in our perfect rows, hands clasped before us, arms forming isosceles triangles with our chests, a geometer's dream, and look down into our eyes for signs of

heresy and sin. When he had chosen a victim he would wait until he had passed that student's desk, then turn slowly and call out the student's name. In this way he would always be standing behind you, out of sight, when you stood to answer a question.

'Antonio Girasole, *alzati per favore.*'

Antonio would rise and face forward, the priest's hot breath setting up a light breeze above his head, like the breath of the Holy Spirit.

'*Dica, Antonio, quante persone ci sono in Dio?*'

Always an easy question to begin.

'*Tre persone, signore.*'

'*Tre persone, juste. E come si chiamano, queste tre persone?*'

'*Il Padre, il Figlio, e lo Spirito Sancto.*'

'*Bene, Antonio, molto bene. Sei veramente un teologo, un gesuita.*'

A titter would arise from the other students. Father Niccolo liked to play with his victims before going in for the kill, like a boy tearing the wings off of flies.

'*E mo dica,* Antonio, how can it be that these three persons are one?'

A dead silence, broken finally by a shuffling of feet, a nervous cough; and then from some distant place in Antonio's throat a small, 'I don't know sir,' and Father Nick would have his first victim.

Fortunately for me the priest tended to pick on the older children, those in grade three or four, so I never felt the weight of his paddle. But Father Nick never failed to crucify a scapegoat or two, allowing them to bear the burden of our collective guilt--for who among us could

have answered those questions of his?--and thus providing an object lesson in the mechanics of Christianity.

After these theatrics, the priest, like a good father, would give us a little talk. (He was careful, though, never to provide the answers to those questions we'd tripped up on.) Now that we had paid our dues, the Father was all sweetness and light. He liked to tell us stories about his days in the seminary.

'I had a friend there named Dompietro,' he told us once, 'who I knew from Rocca Secca. When they gave us beds they put Dompietro in the dormitory across from mine. So on the first morning in the seminary I went to call Dompietro to come with me to breakfast. When I came to where he slept I found him lying on the ground with his head under his bed.

'"Dompietro," I said, "what are you doing under your bed?"

'"I'm looking for my shoe," he said.

'After a few minutes he pulled himself out from under the bed and held up his shoe.

'"*Eccola!*" he said, with a big smile on his face, as if he had just done the greatest thing in the world. Then he knelt down beside his bed, put his hands together, closed his eyes, and whispered a little prayer.

'What a strange fellow this Dompietro is, I thought to myself. He's thanking God because he found his shoe!

'The next morning when I went to call Dompietro it was the same story all over again. There was Dompietro lying on the ground with his head under his bed.

'"Dompietro," I said, "what are you doing under your bed?"

`"I'm looking for my shoe," he said.

`And once again when he found the shoe he whispered a little prayer to the Lord.

`This went on every day for over a week--first the shoe, then the prayer. I was beginning to think that maybe Dompietro was a little crazy. But in everything else he did he seemed very wise. It was only this one thing with the shoe I couldn't understand. So finally I said to him one morning,

`"Dompietro, why is it that every day you have to look for your shoe under the bed? Don't you think the Lord would be much happier if you just put your shoes *beside* your bed, like everyone else, so you wouldn't have to bother him every morning about finding it?"

`"But it's not for my shoe that I speak to the Lord every morning," Dompietro said. "Every night I make sure I throw my shoe under the bed so that in the morning I will have to get down on my knees to look for it. And once I am on my knees I remember to thank the Lord for everything he has given me."'

It was not fair of the priest to tell these stories. If he had simply been a bad man with a paddle, we might have had a chance against him. But as it was we began to identify with our persecutor, to believe that beneath that piggish exterior, those sweaty rolls of fat, was a Father who really had our best interests at heart. And if I could not be a saint, I reasoned, I might settle at least for being a priest. I looked forward with all the misplaced hope of childhood to the heady days I would spend at the seminary, and to the stories I would tell, afterwards, when God's children gathered around me.

I tried the shoe thing once, the night after Father Nick told us his story about Dompietro. The next morning, just as I was crawling into the close space under the bed, my mother came into the room to see what was keeping me from breakfast.

'Vittorio,' she said, 'what are you doing under the bed?'

'I'm looking for my shoe,' I said.

The bed sat a little low, especially where it sagged in the middle, and I had to crawl along on my undershirted belly, my chin scraping along the stone floor, my hair catching on the bed springs, as I stretched my arm out in front of me to grope in the dark for my shoe. But just as my fingers stumbled onto the shoe and laid hold of it, I moved straight into the strands of a misplaced spider's web (misplaced, surely, since a high corner or a window frame would have been a better place for catching flies than the underside of a bed), which wrapped themselves around my face like an infinitely thin net. As soon as I felt the web closing around my face, tickling my nerve endings like a feather, I retreated backwards like a frightened crab. When I came out from under the bed I dropped my shoe and began rubbing my face wildly with my palms. My mother, looking down at me, was laughing.

'Why did you throw your shoe under the bed?' she said, coming over to me and lifting me up by the armpits. She pulled a handkerchief out of her skirt pocket and wiped off my face.

But in answer to her question I only shrugged, my face turning hot with embarrassment; and after she had cleaned me off and helped me dress I put on my shoes and followed her down to breakfast, my morning prayers unsaid.

4. My mother. What had I done with my mother? When did things stop being simple, mother good, father bad? It was easy enough when I only had one father, but now they were multiplying everywhere, my father in America, God the Father, Father Nick, and two of them were invisible, and so all the more unpredictable. Why did I wish my invisible father would never come back from America? My mother I climbed trees with, held the wool for, wrapped my arms around in bed when the house creaked or the balcony door rattled. My mother who I was afraid would catch me praying one night when she came up to sleep. My mother who I avoided watching, pretending to be asleep, as guided only by moonlight she stepped out of her dress, unclipped her bra, slipped into her nightgown, and slid under the sheets beside me. My mother with the loose long hair and the acrid sweat. Who told me, 'Don't believe all those stories Father Niccolo tells you.' Who never moved her lips in church.

Fabrizio, who shared a bed with his three older brothers, had asked me once over cigarettes what it was like sleeping alone.

'I don't sleep alone,' I said. We were sitting in a sheltered hollow at the top of Colle di Papa. It was mid-January and a thin blanket of snow lay over the mountainside, sending up a chill reflective glare. Fabrizio's bare knees were leaning against my covered ones.

'Do you sleep with your grandfather?' This thought seemed to shock Fabrizio almost as much as it shocked me; I could not imagine crawling into bed next to my grandfather and his gnarled, pitted legs.

'With my mother,' I said.

Fabrizio blew a long trail of smoke into the air.

'I don't like smoking in the cold,' he said. 'You can't tell which

is your smoke and which is your breath.' He took a mock puff off his cigarette and blew out again. His breath condensed in a fine mist and hung for a moment, suspended, in the chill morning air.

'Why don't you wear long pants in the winter,' I said.

'My mother thinks I'll go to school if my legs are showing. Because it's warmer there.' The schoolhouse had a small wood-burning stove in the middle of it, which some of the older boys stoked in the winter before class.

'Anyways it's not too cold here,' I said.

We sat silent for a few minutes.

'If your father was here,' Fabrizio said finally, 'he wouldn't let you sleep with your mother.'

Fabrizio waited for me to ask why. He was always setting up these ambushes for me, though I'm sure he didn't see them that way. He collected bits and scraps of information like a beggar collected supper, picking up something from an overheard conversation, something from his older brothers, something from the kids who came in to Valle del Sole from Rome during the summer holidays, and then gathering it all up into strange combinations, which he served up to me. He didn't understand that I didn't have his cool detachment where facts were concerned, that facts seemed to set themselves up against me, waited with stones and clubs around corners.

'Why?' I said finally.

'Your father would want to do the thing to make babies,' Fabrizio said casually. He made a circle with the thumb and index finger of one hand and passed a finger from the other hand through it, back and forth.

'Like the goats.'

A gust of cold wind reached its fingers around the edge of our hollow and stirred the air around us. I threw my cigarette out into the snow and crossed my arms tightly against my chest.

End of catalogue.

So there I was at the age of six a hardened sinner, and feeling no end of guilt about it. And with invisible fathers watching over me, seeing into my deepest thoughts, into my future, knowing at the point where I begged forgiveness during Sunday mass that on Monday I would have sinned again, I did not seem to stand much of a chance. Perhaps in my case God, doubting my intentions, had already placed a moratorium on forgiveness, and now little black marks were accumulating on my soul at a tremendous rate, with no hope of wiping them clean. Out in the pasture, sometimes, as I lay in the sun tending the sheep, my mind drifted through daydreams where by force of will I could turn my body slowly inwards upon itself, collapse it smaller and smaller until it disappeared, finally, in a pinpoint of light; and then I would move through the world with a new freedom, in purest solitude, unseen—even by my invisible fathers.

The situation, however, was not without hope. Our region had its own saint, Santo Camillo de Lellis, born at Bocchianico in 1550, founder of the Ministers of the Sick. He had his own day on the calendar, July 18th, and in Valle del Sole a special collection was taken up on the closest Sunday to that day for the hospital in Rocca Secca. But Camillo, the way la maestra told it, had not always been a saint.

'When he was a young man he was a rogue. He used to drink every

night and then fight in the streets. He was six and a half feet tall and looked like a giant. But it doesn't matter how big you are because God will always make you pay for your sins.

'So finally Sant' Camillo had to pay. One night he was drinking and gambling in a bar in the city with some thieves. He didn't know that the thieves were cheating him but the Lord had sent them to teach Sant' Camillo a lesson. Every time he made a bet, he lost, and the next time he bet twice as much to get back what he had lost. By the end he was so drunk he didn't know what he was doing anymore, and he had gambled away all the money he had in the world. Finally he wagered his gold crucifix which his mother had given him when he was a little boy, on his first communion. And when he lost that too, the thieves picked him up by the neck and threw him into the street, and Sant' Camillo lay down in the sewer and cried.

'That night he set out on foot for his parents' house in Bocchianico, hoping to beg a little money from them. But on the way he started to think of all his parents had done for him to help him have a good life, and how he had caused them only misery. He thought of how they had saved to buy him a gold crucifix on his first communion, and when he reached up to his neck and realized suddenly that in his drunkenness he had gambled the crucifix away, he was filled with guilt. He fell down on his knees and cried out to heaven for mercy. And because God could see into Sant' Camillo's heart, and could see that he had learned his lesson, He caused a bright light to appear in the sky, to show Sant' Camillo that he was forgiven.'

The rest of the story was the standard happily-ever-after of saints:

Saint Camillo joined the monks, built hospitals, cured the sick and dying. Even on his own death-bed he used to crawl around the wards of his hospital in the night, offering what solace he could to the patients. What was important for me, though, was that magic moment of light, when a lifetime of sin and error could be burned away, and all possibilities be opened to you again.

La maestra, though, had altered the facts of the story a little. St. Camillo did once gamble away all his worldly goods, down to his proverbial shirt--that was in the autumn of 1574, in the back streets of Naples. None of my sources, though, mention a gold crucifix, or a moment of revelation on the road to Bocchianico. After Naples young Camillo, as much from hunger as remorse, took a job as a labourer on some new Capuchin buildings at Manfredonia. Over a period of months the friars began to soften him, and he did undergo a kind of Pauline conversion, on Candlemas day in 1575, after a particularly moving exhortation by the guardian of the friars. But no fireworks, no sure sign from the heavens.

Since it respected the unities, the teacher's version--it might have made a good play--was by far superior. Also it was better calculated to stir hope in the breast of a poor sinner like myself. But the problem was you couldn't count on that kind of conversion in advance; otherwise you ran up once again against the whole question of intention. And what la maestra downplayed in these tales of sinner-saints was the horrible toll which guilt and self-doubt continued to exact long after that moment of bright light: St. Camillo suffered from a mysterious disease in his leg for forty-six years; a hernia for thirty-eight years; two pain-

ful sores in his feet for an undetermined period; and, for a long time before he died, from a bad case of anorexia nervosa. The saints, in fact, were more aware than anyone of that hard little turd of evil in their gut which would not pass out, which clung to the intestinal wall like a tumor; hence the hysterical symptoms. And what guarantee did they have that God, seeing into them, wouldn't cast them aside at the last minute? Even the good Saint Gemma, lady of marvels, suffered several hysterical illnesses, including the one which killed her, as well as a few visits from the Prince of Darkness himself: and yet, for all her troubles, in the final painful weeks of her short life the spirit of the Lord deserted her, no doubt giving her cause to wonder if all the trials of her holiness had not been simply the pangs of conscience and guilt, and no assurance against the treachery of a cold heaven. Or think of Christ himself, crying 'Eli! Eli!' in his last desperate moments, while God, his absent sire, was picking his teeth in the clouds.

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VII --SNAKE

Except for a new coat of paint here and there on a door or window frame, via San Giuseppe had probably not changed much in over a century, the same shadows shrinking and stretching with the movement of the sun, the same cobblestoned quiet hedged in by balconies and thick stone walls and resting its sleepy head against the doorway to history. On a summer day, with the sun just past its apex, you would find the street almost deserted, all the villagers either comfortably snoozing in their homes after their noonday meal or stretched out in some shady bower in the fields, munching on bread and provolone. On July the fifteenth, though, in the year 1956, one small boy had ventured into the sun and was sitting cross-legged now on the stone bench in front of his grandfather's house, a book called *Principi Matematici* open in his lap to page 3.

I had not done well on my grade one exams. The teacher had sent me home with a note:

> *Vittorio Innocente è intelligente ma falso. Pero, se la signora non si interesse alla sua educazione, non ce niente a fare.*

'*Falso*' was the dialect word for 'lazy.' I was lazy but showed some potential. The teacher blamed my mother for failing to rein me in. She was still sore about the smoking incident.

My mother shook her head and laughed when she read the letter.

'Well, next year we're going to show la maestra, eh, signor Innocente? When you grow up you're going to be a pope, so I can live like a

queen in my old age. This summer you can catch up on all the lessons you missed while you were out chasing sheep with Fabrizio.'

Hence the *Principi Matematici*. Which, however, I was not attending to. I had slipped into one of those states of passive indolence which were very common at that time of year, especially when it was one o'clock and the sun was shining and the whole world seemed wrapped in a warm, yellow dream. My grandfather had gone up to Di Lucci's for a digestif--Di Lucci, a true enterpreneur, must have been the only person in Italy who didn't close up shop during siesta, and would take his own lunch downstairs in his back room instead of upstairs with his family to make sure he didn't miss any customers. His initiative had paid off--Di Lucci owned the only car in Valle del Sole, a somewhat battered 1952 Fiat Cinquecento which he had bought used in Rocca Secca and which he parked prominently next to his bar, not heeding the warnings of his wife about the *invidia* it was likely to inspire there.

My mother had received a letter that morning from the *postino*. I had gotten a look at the envelope--neat, legible script in bright blue ink, and Italian stamps. But when my grandfather had asked her who it was from, my mother had said that it was from my father. Who else ever sent letters to my mother? After lunch, my mother had slipped out of the house, making me promise to sit still in the kitchen and study my books.

'Where are you going?' I asked.

'I have an appointment.'

'With who?'

'With the man who cuts the birdies off of boys who ask too many

questi ons.'

Always joking, my mother.

After trying unsuccessfully to study in the kitchen, I had come out finally to my place on the stone bench. My attention was now fixed on a cluster of goat droppings. A swarm of flies hovered around it, the braver ones alighting and calling out to their friends, 'It's goat, but it's not bad!' They rubbed their hands together the way my uncle Pasquale did when he sat down to a plate of *pasta al' uovo*.

A flock of sheep came around the corner from the direction of the square. Behind them walked old Angelo Danello--The Red, we called him, because his father had once been to Russia; though many years of faithful drinking had helped him conform to his name, for his face and nose were bright with broken blood vessels. He moved with the measured nonchalance of someone who had nowhere special to go, slapping his sheep stick against a loose pant leg as he walked. The horde of flies around the goat droppings rose in unison as the sheep approached.

'Ho, Vittõ,' Luigi called out as he passed. '*Ma che fai, dormi o vivi?*'

'I'm studying my mathematics,' I said, opening my eyes wide and flipping a page. 'I'm going to be a pope.'

'A pope! Why settle for a pope? Why not Jesus Christ himself?'

This possibility had never occurred to me.

I stared after Angelo as he ushered his flock up the street. Not far beyond my grandfather's house the cobblestones ended and the road deteriorated into a dirt path. A thin cloud of brown dust rose up from the ground as the sheep moved onto the dirt, and sheep's bleating turned

hoarse, as if they were choking. At the Fonte di Colle di Papa Angelo stopped for a moment, cupped his hand under the spout, and brought some water to his mouth.

As the bleating of Luigi's sheep grew distant and small, I turned my eyes back towards the black and white silence of my book. I turned another page, relieved for a moment by the taut crinkling of paper, but found myself confronted again by another page of odd pictures and symbols. One black apple plus one black apple equals two black apples. Then, underneath, these strange markings: 1 + 1 = 2. The book seemed to be arguing that I make some connection between the apples and the markings underneath them, but the sun, reflecting off the white page and filling my eyes with sleep, was arguing otherwise. Slowly my eyelids drooped and closed, while a happy host of apples and numbers, freed from the tyranny of the book, danced in my head in wild combinations.

I was awakened by a muffled shout.

The shout--it sounded like a man's--had seemed to come from the stable. I set down my books and started down the steps at the side of the house--the house had been cut into a slope, so that the stable, which lay underneath the kitchen, was buried on the street side but opened out at ground level in back. But when I rounded the corner at the bottom of the steps I stopped short. The stable door was closed, but through a crack at the bottom of it a small, tapered head was flicking its tongue--a snake. I had seen it just in time, and now I stood frozen as it slithered long and slim through the crack in the door and down a row of tomatoes in my grandfather's garden. I stared after it, watching the tomato vines rustle in its wake, until sound and motion disappeared,

finally, into the ravine at the edge of the garden.

Snakes, in Valle del Sole, had long been imbued with special meaning. You could hear any number of snake stories around the village, Snake and the Maiden, Snake and the Frog, Snake and Umberto Lotto, a nineteenth century *padrone* who had no sooner raped his young daughter than he was bitten by a snake and dropped dead. There was a saying in Valle del Sole, '*Dove l'orgoglio se ne va, la serpe sta.*' Snake comes before a fall. It was pro forma in Valle del Sole to make a sign of the cross whenever a snake crossed your path.

But the villagers' views on snakes were not completely consistent. No doubt if they had been pressed most of them would have cited the bible as their authority, not realizing that even the bible was not entirely clear on this point: after all there were two versions of creation in the opening chapters of Genesis, two origins, different worlds which parted, perhaps, forever, one fallen but one still serpentless and sublime. And then there were traces in the villagers' beliefs that stood outside biblical tradition, predated it. There were those, for instance, who saw the snake not as a symbol of evil but as a fertility figure, and who refused to kill snakes, fearing it would ruin their harvest. They believed the snake's ability to shed its skin was proof of its immortality, and sometimes bought old snake skins from *la strega* in Rocca Secca, which they ground into powder and spread over their fields. There were other variations, more complex, those who thought a snake crossing you from the right brought good fortune, from the left, bad; others who saw two snakes, the evil brown and the sacred green. There were even a few heretics who thought that a snake was just

a snake. But the orthodox view held that Snake was a direct agent of the evil eye.

The snake that had crossed my path had been green, but it had come from the left. In my excitement I forgot to cross myself, and it was a moment too before I remembered the strange shout that had aroused me from my sleep. Now when I turned back to the stable door I saw that it had been opened slightly, and that two dark eyes were staring down at me from the shadows. I could make out no features of the figure they belonged to--only those two eyes, drinking up the darkness around them and concentrating their energies on me as if to make me disappear by sheer force of will. I was just about to turn and run when the stable door opened a few inches further, and the two eyes suddenly swooped out of the stable like swallows, rushing towards me. But as they caught the sunlight they underwent a magical transformation: they turned suddenly a sharp sky blue, like two bright flames, and the sight of them filled my head, burning away all the other features of the figure that was bearing down on me.

My only thought now was escape. But as I turned to run but my legs got tangled together and I fell to the stony ground. I lay still for a moment on my stomach, waiting in terror for whatever had come out of the stable to pounce on me, my arms crossed over my head to shield me. But the blow did not come; and a moment later the sound of cracking twigs and moving branches behind me told me that something had followed the snake into the ravine.

For a moment I sat where I had fallen, waiting for the pounding in my head to subside and rubbing my scraped palms to ease their pain.

Then I went up to the stable door and cautiously pulled it fully open, not daring yet to step inside. As the door opened, a shaft of sunlight gradually stretched into the stable, coming to rest at my mother's sandalled feet. She was standing over the low wall of the pig pen, pouring a bucket of water into the pig's trough, a lantern burning pale blue beside her. Her dress was wrinkled, and I noticed a piece of straw hanging in her hair. She turned as I came in.

'Vittorio,' she said casually, setting her bucket on the ground, 'I thought you were studying your mathematics.'

'I heard someone shouting,' I said.

'Oh, that was nothing. I saw a snake.'

'It was a man's shout.'

My mother fixed her eyes on me and made a characteristic movement with her lips, a pursing together and a drawing to one side.

'What did you see when you came down here?' she said. Something in her tone told me that I should think carefully before answering her question.

'I saw a snake coming out of the stable,' I said cautiously.

My mother smiled and crouched down beside me.

'Don't be afraid,' she said. 'Maybe other people will ask you what you saw too. What will you tell them?'

I stared down at the ground. Question and answer: so much of my world was formed this way, from grade one catechism forward, the orderly arrangement of facts, the suppression of some, the bringing into prominence of others. My mother now was asking me to pick and choose, to tell a story that began with a a snake but ended with her standing

calmly before me, as if nothing had happened.

'Only a snake,' I said, still not looking at her. 'That's all I saw.'

My mother stood over me a moment, then bent to plant a kiss on my forehead. I had said the right thing, then. And now that I had said it I began to wonder if I really *had* seen anything more, if the afternoon sun had not simply been playing tricks on me. It had all happened so quickly that for a moment it was just possible to believe that those blue eyes had been some strange aberration that could not be explained through any of the usual rules by which things happened, like a miracle. It would not be until the next day, when I came down to take out the sheep, that I would find the pair of tinted glasses in the straw, the same kind that I had lost in the river the year before.

But now something else had caught my attention.

'Mamma,' I said, 'there's some blood on your foot.' I had noticed two small red spots, like pin pricks, on her ankle.

My mother bent down and passed a finger over the little drops, smearing them across her skin.

'Oh, Christ,' she said, taking a deep breath. 'Vittorio, run up quickly to Di Lucci's and get him to bring his car. Tell him I've been bitten by a snake.'

VIII--A TRIP TO ROCCA SECCA

I could see my grandfather and Di Lucci playing cards on the terrace as I ran up towards the bar.

'Mamma's been bitten by a snake!' I yelled out, still halfway down the street. The village women who had come out after their siesta to knit or sew on their front steps stared after me as I ran; others popped their heads out of doorways and over balconies.

'Come quickly! Mamma's been bitten by a snake!'

My grandfather was already halfway down the terrace steps by the time I got to the bar.

'Andò!' he called out to Di Lucci, who was still standing open-mouthed on the terrace. 'What are you waiting for? Get your car!'

Within minutes we were scrambling into Di Lucci's tiny two-door Fiat, me crawling into the back seat and Di Lucci trying to help my grandfather pull his legs into the front.

'Never mind my legs,' my grandfather said. 'Get in and drive.'

Di Lucci squeezed his body into the driver's seat and moved his hand towards the ignition.

'*Le chiavi*! I've forgotten the keys.'

He scrambled out of his seat and ran back into the bar. I could hear him shouting upstairs to his wife.

'Mari! MARIA! Where are the keys to the car?'

'Oh, Andò!' came back her high-pitched shout. 'Why are you shouting like a madman? How should I know where you put the keys! Do I drive your car? It's your car, you should know where you put the keys!

Aren't they in the glove compartment where you always put them? Where are you going with the car?'

Di Lucci came running back onto the terrace and down the steps. A few strands of his thin hair had fallen across his forehead and his face had flushed a deep red. Thirty years of sitting behind a bar and nursing glasses of watered-down wine had not prepared him for emergencies. He carried his belly in front of him like a huge gourd.

'*Ma sbrigati*, Andõ!' my grandfather called out. 'Here, I've got the keys.'

Di Lucci's wife, a stout woman who might have made a good ox, had come out onto the balcony above the bar's terrace. She was wiping her hands on her apron.

'*Ma dove vai*, Andõ? I just finished making your lunch! The spaghetti is going to stick--then you can feed it to the pigs!'

'Look after the store,' Di Lucci called out through his open window, pulling out into the square with a lurch. 'The mayor's daughter has been bitten by a snake!'

From the back window of the car I saw Di Lucci's wife make a sign of the cross.

The front steps and balconies along via San Giuseppe were lined now with women and children anxious for distraction.

'*Ma che success*'?' the women called out, crowding up to the car windows as Di Lucci tried to maneuver his sputtering Fiat through the narrow street.

'*Scansatevi, per favore*!' Di Lucci shouted, leaning on his horn. 'Can't you see that we're in a hurry?'

By the time we got down to my grandfather's house we had a crowd in tow, women dropping their knitting or their washing in the kitchen to fall in behind us, little toddlers coming after them, bawling at being left behind, older children running ahead and mimicking Di Lucci's curses. Even my aunt Lucia, who, in her mid-seventies, seldom moved from the comfort of her kitchen, and who showed little of the relish for scandal and intrigue which kept the other village women sitting all the long day on their front stoops, eyes trained on the least movements of their neighbours, had come out now to her front door to see what had caused the commotion, her daughter Marta staring out of the shadows behind her. But when we pulled up in front of the house the noise of the crowd fell down to a whisper, because there was my mother sitting calmly on the stone bench as if nothing had happened, one leg crossed over the other, her hands folded neatly on her lap. She had put on a new dress, a sleek flowered one, and had combed out her hair.

'Vittorio said you'd been bitten by a snake,' Di Lucci said, speaking to her through my grandfather's open window. The village women were hanging back, keeping the car between themselves and my mother.

'Yes,' my mother said simply, rising. She came around to the driver's side, the women making way for her as she passed, whispering among themselves.

'Well, aren't you going to let me in?' she said to Di Lucci.

Di Lucci, confused for a moment by my mother's calm, and embarrassed by his own excitement, finally collected himself and heaved himself out of the car.

'You'd think you were just going to the market,' he said, pulling

back the driver's seat. But before letting my mother in he leaned his head into the back seat. 'Vittorio, you get out and wait at home.'

'No,' my mother said behind him. 'I want him to come with me.'

'*Ma* Andò,' my grandfather said, '*per l'amore di Cristo*, just let her get in the car and let's go.'

We set off, leaving the village women behind us, a few of my schoolmates running alongside as far as the edge of the cobblestones and waving to me before being discouraged by the dust. My grandfather and Di Lucci rolled up their windows. Then my grandfather shifted finally in his seat and turned with a grimace to face my mother.

'Where did it bite you?' His voice trembled slightly because of the vibrations of the car. The trail out of Valle del Sole up to the main road, though relatively straight, was really just an old goat path, and was scarred by pot holes and dips and the ruts of ox carts.

'On the ankle,' my mother said.

'Why didn't you tie something around your leg?'

'I didn't think of it.'

'Vittorio, take off your shirt.'

I unbuttoned my shirt as quickly as I could and my mother helped me pull it off my back, leaving me in my undershirt.

'How long ago were you bitten?' my grandfather said.

'Ten minutes or so.'

'Tie the shirt a little ways up from the bite.'

My mother twisted my shirt into a half-knot part way up her calf.

'Vittorio, help her to pull it tight. You take one end while she holds the other. Pull until it hurts.' . . . . . .

I pulled on my end with all my strength while my mother pulled on hers. The cloth sank into her leg and the skin around it turned white.

'Pull harder,' my grandfather said.

We pulled again; the cloth burned against my palm. I looked at my mother, expecting her to wince; but her eyes caught mine, and she stretched her lips into a sleepy smile. She took the loose ends of the shirt and tied them into a knot.

'You have to stop the blood,' Di Lucci said. We had pulled onto the main road now, and Di Lucci was picking up speed. 'My grandmother's uncle was bitten by a snake when he was hoeing his vineyard down by the Valley of the Pigs. They had to cut his leg off because the poison had spread too far.'

'I never heard of anyone having his leg cut off because of a snake bite,' my grandfather said. 'And slow down. These roads were made for mules, not cars.'

The main road was less pitted than the trail which led into Valle del Sole: work crews came through every summer and smashed up rocks and stones from the countryside into coarse gravel which they used to fill in holes. But the road had been carved straight out of the mountainside, and followed every one of the mountain's erratic curves. In this scheme little margin had been left for error--if a small Fiat and an ox cart met going in opposite directions, there were about twelve inches of clearance between a rock wall on one side and a steep slope on the other. But Di Lucci was taking the curves wide and fast, centrifugal force keeping my mother and me swaying against each other in the back seat.

'For God's sake, Andò, there's no need to kill us all,' my grandfather said, but Di Lucci did not let up on his speed, counting on his horn to warn in time whatever lay in wait around corners. He brushed off now a close call with a peasant and his hay-laden mule.

'Damn peasants,' he said. 'Most of them have never seen a car before.' Through the back window I saw the mule's wizened owner raise an angry fist after us. But Di Lucci had other things on his mind: he took his eyes off the road for a second now to shoot a backward glance into the back seat.

'What colour was the snake?' he asked, a little breathlessly, obviously having restrained himself this long only out of decorum.

'Green,' I said, without thinking.

'Green? You saw it too? Well, green is better than brown. Did it come from the right or the left?'

Di Lucci was up on his snake lore.

'Never mind about your superstitions,' my grandfather said. 'What do you know about snakes?'

'My grandmother's uncle--'

'We don't want to hear about your grandmother's uncle.'

'*Bè, scusa*, I just thought--'

'Just think about your driving.'

My mother, meanwhile, sat quietly in the back seat staring at the passing countryside, looking only a little tired. When I looked down at her ankle, though, I saw it had started to swell.

Di Lucci remained silent for a moment, putting his energies into frightening a flock of approaching sheep to the side of the road, his

hand leaning on his horn. We trundled past the sheep just as their shepherd, thrashing out wildly with his staff, managed to beat the last of them into single file against the mountain face. But now Di Lucci was ready for another volley.

'Where did it bite you?'

My mother let out a resigned sigh.

'Andō, you heard me say just a few minutes ago. On the ankle.'

'Yes, of course, on the ankle, but I mean where were you when it bit you on the ankle?'

'Too close to a snake.'

'*Ma, scusa*, Christī, I'm asking a simple question.'

'You ask too many questions,' my mother said. 'You're like an old woman. You've been sitting in that bar too long, listening to other people's nonsense.'

'Well maybe the doctor will want to know some of these things. What happens if you faint before we get to the hospital? My grandmother's uncle--'

'*Scusa*, Andō, what does the doctor care where I was when the snake bit me?' my mother said, her voice tinged with irritation now. 'If it bit me in the church, or in the stable, what's the difference?'

'So you were in the stable then.'

Elementary. Di Lucci paused for a moment to relish this little victory before driving home.

'And what were you doing in the stable?' he said finally.

'Oh, Andō, *basta*! What does anyone do in the stable? I was feeding the pigs!'

Now my grandfather, who seemed to have been paying much more attention to Di Lucci's driving than to this conversation, turned his head around and looked at my mother.

'I thought you fed the animals this morning.'

'I was checking their water,' my mother said impatiently. 'I didn't have time to fill their troughs this morning.' My mother turned her gaze towards the window again, but now her face was stern and sullen.

Bumbling Di Lucci, man of light. Did he know something? Or was he just following an Italian's instinct, that beneath every simple event there lurked some dark scandal? At any rate he had succeeded, now, in causing a slight crack to appear in my mother's polished surface. And if Di Lucci's small discovery made little difference in the long run, it gave him at least a claim to priority. I can picture him, now, leaning over his bar a few weeks later and whispering to one of his patrons: 'And then the old man turned around and said to her, "But you fed the animals this morning." *You fed the animals this morning.* That's when I knew.'

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IX--THE HOSPITAL

The hospital in Rocca Secca was on the outskirts of town, a high-walled medieval building that had been an orphanage before being converted during the second war. We entered through massive front doors into a large reception room filled with whispers and moans, people

everywhere, leaning against walls, sitting on the floor, shuffling around the room like ghosts--hard-featured peasants, mainly, most of them still in their dirty working clothes, and many of them nursing bandaged limbs or internal ailments that showed themselves only in their low moans and pale skin. A few babies were crying, but their wails seemed stifled by the atmosphere of almost religious reverence that hung over the room. The only light came from two narrow windows in one wall: a naked bulb hung down from the centre of the high ceiling, but it was not lit.

Di Lucci had come in first, flustered and flushed, my mother and I next, she limping now and leaning on me a little as we walked, her ankle swollen almost to bursting. My grandfather followed behind us, his shoes clopping heavily on the room's marble floor. A small desk was wedged in one corner of the room, and a woman in nurse's uniform and cap sat behind it. She was filing her nails.

Di Lucci went up to the desk, stepping over a man with a bandaged leg who had stretched himself out on the floor and closed his eyes.

'This woman has been bitten by a snake,' Di Lucci said, pointing to my mother. 'Look at the way her ankle is swelling up.'

A silence descended on the room when Di Lucci said 'snake,' and everyone's eyes seemed to turn towards us. An old woman in black made a sign of the cross and mumbled a few words to herself. The man with the bandaged leg opened his eyes and sat up suddenly, looking on now with interest.

'You'll have to fill out a form,' the receptionist said.

Now my grandfather had come up to the desk.

'How long before she can see the doctor?' he said, leaning heavily on his cane. 'It's been over an hour since she was bitten.' He was exaggerating a little.

The receptionist had a friendly face--dark eyes as large as chestnuts and a little nose that curved upwards at its peak; but my grandfather's sense of urgency did not seem to impress her.

'You can see the doctor is very busy today,' she said, making a sweeping gesture with her arm, to indicate the crowded room.

Di Lucci reached a hand into his pant pocket and pulled it out with a note crumpled in his fist. He set the note discreetly on the desk and pushed it with his fingers towards the receptionist. The receptionist opened a drawer, let Di Lucci's fingers push the bill into it, then closed the drawer again with her elbow. She shrugged.

'I'll see what I can do,' she said.

'Go find a place to sit with your mother,' my grandfather said to me. 'Help her to loosen the bandage, then count to thirty in your head and tie it up again.'

My mother had not spoken for some time. Her eyes were drooping now and she was swaying on her feet. When I looked around the room for a place to sit, the man with the bandaged leg motioned me over to where he was. He squeezed his own thin body over so that there was space on the wall beside him. He made a show of wiping the floor with his hand, but the grime there seemed to be permanent, a layer of grey hiding the mottled green and brown of the marble underneath.

'What colour was the snake?' the man whispered when we had sat down on the floor beside him. My mother looked at him drowsily but didn't

answer.

'Green,' I said. Another wave of whispers passed through the room.

'Green is good,' the man said. 'Maybe you'll have a good harvest.'

He helped me to loosen my mother's tourniquet while I kept time in my head. When we had finished my mother looked at me and smiled.

'You'll take care of me, eh, Vittorio?' she said. But her voice sounded dreamy and far-off.

'The poison is spreading,' the man whispered to me over my mother's outstretched legs, speaking as if my mother couldn't hear him. 'It starts to affect the head.' He shook his head sadly. My mother's ankle had swollen now to the size of a melon.

'At least they have medicines now,' the man said, still whispering over my mother in confidence, and treating me with the candour someone would show to an adult. 'In the old days, heh, *addio*! She'll be all right, once the doctor sees her. It's worse when they can't do anything for you, only say a prayer and send you home. That man over there, by the door'--he made a gesture with his chin across the room, where a man sat in one of the rooms few chairs, the end of one arm wrapped up in bloody rags--'what can the doctor do for him now? The police brought him in here not two hours ago. He had a fight with his neighbour about a chicken. His neighbour came over with a shotgun, they started shouting and screaming, and, pom! the next thing you know his hand is gone, shot right off. Because of a chicken! And that boy beside him, with the patch over his eye--some of his schoolmates thought it was funny to tease him because one eye was green and one eye was brown. They said he had a devil in him. So next thing you know he

takes a stick and plahck! that's the end of it. His own eye! God save us all!'

But now there was some commotion at the entranceway. A young woman had come in bent over double and clutching her stomach, led by a thin, older woman in black. Just as the young woman crossed the threshhold her body convulsed in a spasm and a stream of blue vomit shot from her mouth onto the floor, spattering onto the leg of the man with the bloody arm. He did not seem to notice--he was in a trance, rocking back and forth in his chair and mumbling a prayer to himself, his bloody stump clutched to his chest. But the nurse behind the reception desk looked up now from where she was still filling in forms with my grandfather and Di Lucci and wrinkled her small nose.

'Beatrice!' she bellowed out, mustering a volume you would not have thought her slender throat could support. 'Bring a bucket! And a mop!' And a minute later Beatrice, somewhat heftier and plainer than the receptionist, her uniform a little askew, and stained in places, came bustling out of a corridor bearing bucket and mop to tend to the woman with the blue vomit. The woman's black-habited guide, meanwhile, had parked her charge against a wall and joined my grandfather and Di Lucci at the reception desk, where she launched into a long plea in a cracked, high-pitched whine.

'I beg you, signora, I beg you, my daughter is dying. She's the only one left to me now, all dead, God has taken every one of them--it's a curse, *dio mio*, a curse, the doctor must see her--'

'*Scusa, signora*,' Di Lucci interjecting, 'but this man's daughter has been bitten by a snake--'

'SI! SI! a snake! It was a snake they sent, to ruin my family's honour. *L'invidia!* Ohhh, *dio mio*, ohhhhh--' and now she broke into a long funereal wail that filled the room and made people shift uncomfortably in their places, but seemed to liven them up, too, as if they were glad they could think about someone else's problem for a minute. Mutters of *'poveretta'* went up around the room, and even the man with the bloody stump looked up for a moment from his chanting, and shook his head sadly.

My grandmother had wailed like that, the day my grandfather had dropped stone dead on the floor of his kitchen, those same long shuddering groans that seemed to come from sources too deep to think about, all the misery of ages caught up in them. And though I had felt a wave of relief that day at seeing my grandfather lying safe and still on the kitchen floor, a moment later my grandmother had begun her long soul-piercing wail, and my relief had given way to terror. I could hear those wails echoing in my bones now as the woman in black bemoaned the fate of her dying daughter. From the murk of memory an image floated into my head of my grandfather's face frozen in a wide-eyed wide-mouthed look of death; and that image led me now to confuse my present with my past, for when I looked up at my mother and saw her sitting still and pale beside me with her eyes glazed and her jaw wide open, two images flowed into each other and coalesced into a moment fearful certainty.

'She's dead!' I cried out. 'My mother's dead!'

Now all attention turned away from the wailing woman and focussed itself onto me and my mother as hands came up to mouths to stifle gasps and the crowd closed in around us. Di Lucci came pushing through the

crowd shouting curses, 'Stand back! Stand back! *Jesu Cristʼ e Maria!*' and not knowing what to do he reached down and slapped my mother across the cheek; but though her head jerked to one side her jaw did not close and the glaze did not leave her eyes. Finally my grandfather came up behind Di Lucci and crouched painfully to take hold of my mother's wrist, while the onlookers around us craned their necks and held their breaths. But finally my grandfather said: 'She's gone into shock. Everyone get back and let her have some air.' The crowd held its place for a moment, necks still craning forward for a better view; but finally, under my grandfather's urging, people slowly returned to their places, muttering and sighing their relief and mumbling benedictions.

A moment later footsteps echoed down the nearby corridor, and all heads turned again to witness the entrance of the doctor. From where I sat he seemed to stretch almost up to the ceiling, a tall, thin man with sharp features, black hair slicked neatly back, not a strand out of place. He had on a white lab coat, which was spotless, and his shoes had been polished so brightly they showed a reflection. He looked out at the waiting room from behind small, wire-framed spectacles.

'Who's next,' he said, turning to the receptionist. She was about to speak when the man with the bandaged leg said, 'Take la signora,' indicating my mother with his chin. Others in the room murmured their agreement.

'She's been bitten by a snake,' Di Lucci added, assuming now a voice of authority. 'She's in shock.'

The doctor looked down at my mother from his great height and

frowned.

'Very well,' he said, then called out down the corridor, 'Beatrice! Bring in a stretcher!'

Beatrice, having left the vomiting woman seated on the ground, the bucket between her legs, came hurrying back.

'There all being used, doctor,' she said.

'What about that one in the corridor,' the doctor said, gesturing towards a stretcher just visible, from where I was sitting, at the corridor's end. But the stretcher was occupied--a sheet draped over it formed the contours of nose, belly, knees, toes.

'Someone put him on the ground,' the doctor said. 'He won't be needing any more attention.'

There was some nervous shuffling in the room but no one moved forward to lift the body off the stretcher. Finally the man with the bandaged leg raised himself up and limped down the corridor.

'Well,' he called back, 'someone give me a hand.'

'Go help him,' my grandfather said to Di Lucci.

'*Ma scusa*,' Di Lucci said, 'that's a dead man!'

'If he's dead then he won't complain,' my grandfather said.

Finally the exchange was been made, the dead man, still under his sheet, lifted by a flushed Di Lucci and the man with the bandaged leg onto the floor and my mother, still opened-eyed and wide-mouthed, set in his place on the stretcher. Beatrice wheeled the stretcher away and the doctor followed at a discreet distance, the clack of his heels against the marble floor receding with him down the dim corridor.

X--WHISPERS IN THE DARK

My mother survived her snake bite. She spent three days in the hospital; and during that time, while herding the sheep back into the stable one afternoon, I discovered the pair of tinted glasses that someone had dropped in the straw. I could not suppress a thrill of ownership as I slipped them into my pocket, and when I had them safely in my mother's room I bent their thin wire arms tightly around my ears, and stared for several minutes in the small mirror that hung over my mother's writing table at the strange figure I cut. I looked like a soldier, I thought; it was usually the soldiers, in Rocca Secca, who wore tinted glasses.

That night I hid the glasses under my mattress, though with no clear idea of what I was going to do with them. I couldn't wear them in Valle del Sole, I vaguely realized; but perhaps I could show them to Fabrizio. But by the next morning it was clear to me that my acquisitiveness had been wrong in some way, and that I had been punished for it, for the glasses' lenses had shattered in the night against the bed springs, small shards of tinted glass littering the floor under the bed. I carefully collected up all the fragments and wrapped them in a handkerchief, along with the frame, and took them with me that next day when I went out to tend the sheep. Then, closing my eyes, I walked five hundred paces in a jagged line, knelt, eyes still closed, and bit blindly into the dirt with my fingers until I had dug what seemed to be a big hole, into which I dumped, finally, the remains of the glasses. Still blind I covered the hole and stamped down the dirt, then walked another five

hundred random, jagged paces. When I opened my eyes, finally, I was only a few feet distant from where I had started out; but I could not say for certain where I had buried the glasses, and felt sure, therefore, that no one else would ever discover them.

Di Lucci brought my grandfather and me in to see my mother once, when he went into town for provisions. She had been placed in a large second-floor ward containing about thirty beds, all of them filled with pale, sickly women who moaned and mumbled in their beds and whose pallor seemed to blend into the drabness of the grey walls. My mother, though, stood out like a flower in a dead landscape. Her colour had returned, and she sat propped up in bed against a pillow leafing through a magazine, her hair flowing sleek around her shoulders. Her face lit up when she saw me and my grandfather coming towards her.

'So, you leave me to sleep with all these old women,' she said pulling me up beside her, 'while you run around like a *diavolo*. Have you been reading your books?'

'When are you coming home?' I said.

'If I had my way I'd come home with you right now. They make their spaghetti sauce here with water and old blood. They take the blood out of your arm in the morning and in the afternoon they serve it up in your pasta.'

Flanking my mother's bed on either side, like Fates, were two old women with grey, wrinkled skin. One was lost in her prayers, her hand fingering the beads of a rosary. The other lay with her eyes closed, her mouth half-open, a little stream of spit dribbling down the side of her face. A plastic tube fed into her arm from a glass bottle suspended

near her bed.

'Why does that woman have that thing in her arm?' I whispered to my mother.

'Because she's dying,' my mother whispered back. 'Everyone in here is dying except me.'

On the day Di Lucci and my grandfather brought her back from the hospital, there was a mattress strapped to the roof of Di Lucci's Cinquecento. I was sitting on the stone bench in front of my grandfather's house, waiting, when I saw the little Fiat come barrelling down from the main road in a cloud of dust, the object on its roof tilting precariously to one side, straining against the ropes that had been used to secure it. The car stopped abruptly in front of my grandfather's house, and the thing on the roof finally slipped through its ropes and bounced onto the cobblestones, coming to rest flat not far from my feet. A real factory-made mattress was a rarity in Valle del Sole. Even the wool mattress my mother and I slept on had been home-made, stuffed full with shearings many years before as a nuptial bed for my grandfather and his wife.

'Il signor Vittorio Innocente,' my mother said, getting out of the car and coming to sit beside me. She was dressed as she had been on the day she had gone to the hospital, but her hair was pulled back in a bun. 'Vittorio Emanuele, King of Italy, Pope Innocente, head of the Vatican and the Roman Catholic Church. *Come va*? Has the pope been studying his mathematics?'

'I don't want to be the pope anymore,' I said. 'I want to be Jesus Christ.'

My mother laughed.

'It's too late for that. When the angel came your mother was already in bed with St. Joseph.'

'That's how you speak to your son,' Di Lucci said, struggling to lift the mattress upright against the side of his car. But there was something off in his tone; it was more than usually sententious, lacked the defensiveness it usually had when he spoke to my mother. And my mother replied with more than the usual irritation: 'We know what you teach *your* children: how to cheat a peasant over 50 grams of salt. We'll see what the Lord has to say to you on judgement day, when he finds out the prices you've been charging in your store.'

'*Basta*, Cristi,' my grandfather said, genuine anger tinging his voice for a moment, but then immediately tempered: 'You're going to give Antonio bad dreams. Andò, see if you can get someone to give us a hand with this bed.' He sat down beside my mother and me with a grunt, and spat into the street.

Something strange was going on here. Eyes were not meeting when people spoke. And words were coming out with sharp edges, like shards of glass--I could almost seem them lying there in the street, glinting, like my grandfather's brown spit.

'Mamma,' I whispered, 'what are you going to do with the bed?' A vaguely frightening thought had occurred to me: perhaps my father had heard of our sleeping arrangements, and this new mattress leaning casually against Di Lucci's was the first sign of his wrath, its bright floral pattern, rose space rose, bespeaking a false innocence.

But no; it was simpler than that--I was being ousted, but by time,

not my father. 'Ask your grandfather,' my mother said, shrugging, 'he bought it.' And my grandfather, not looking at me: 'It's for you. Next month you'll be seven. That's no age to be sleeping with your mother.'

I spent the night on my new factory-made mattress, in the small dusty room just next to my mother's. An old straw mattress, remnant of my mother's childhood, bug-infested and smelling of mould and rats, had been tossed over the balcony and burned, and my own had been installed on its crooked wooden frame. My new mattress took up only half the space of the frame, a foot and a half of bare board sticking out on either side, making my sheets and blankets seem to stick out like wings. Apart from this winged bed I had a night table to set a candle on, and a wicker chair to drape my clothes over. The usual thin curtains covered the balcony doors; a water stain, shaped like a huge tear drop, adorned one of the walls, and a spider web that my mother had missed in her cleaning stretched silver and taut across an upper corner.

I was probably the only seven-year-old in Valle del Sole with his own bedroom, certainly the only one with his own factory-made mattress, but that first night in bed, wedged between the clean, crisp, foreign sheets, I felt only despair. I did not say my prayers because the bed felt strange to me, and I was afraid it would jinx my prayers and send them to the devil; and I did not dare sleep on my preferred but dangerous left side, and so spent half an hour switching between back and right shoulder before deciding finally on the shoulder.

For a long time, though, I lay rigid, unable to sleep. Through the half-open balcony doors some night travellers, moon, wind, and stars,

threw a few sidelong glances into my room, wondering if they might find some temporary rest there. Finally the wind nudged one of the doors open a little further, then slipped inside and sat down in the chair beside my bed, whispering coolly onto my exposed cheek.

After a while I heard my mother coming up to bed, heard her sandals on the stairs, her door open and close, the springs of her bed creak. A long period of silence followed; even the wind had grown quiet, sitting beside me, waiting, as I was, with bated breath for the inevitable sounds from the balcony, fated to me on this night when I had left my mother alone in her large nuptial bed, prey to shadows. And finally the sound came, the scrape of metal against metal, and the wind began to whisper again, not to me but to the moon and stars, who had joined him now in colloquy at my bedside, were whispering along with him, '*poveretto, poveretto*,' but underneath these whispers I could still hear those of the soldiers as they conferred outside my mother's balcony doors, as they slung their rifles over their shoulders finally, their blue eyes glowing like flames in the darkness, and slipped inside my mother's room.

'It's time to go,' they said, in perfect Italian, and my mother opened her eyes and gently set aside her covers. She was fully dressed: she had been waiting for them. Soundlessly she followed them out of her room and down the stairs. At the front door they stopped for a moment as one of the soldiers lit up a cigarette; then the three of them, one by one, stepped through the doorway and into the night. They moved in the direction of the main road, my mother walking between the two soldiers in her slow, easy pace, while I, borne up now on my winged bed by

the wind and moon and stars, watched from overhead. No one talked, and for a long time the only sound was that of jackboots trudging along parched earth as my mother and the soldiers grew smaller and smaller in the night. Now the moon, growing tired with its night wandering, blinked its heavy lid, and was gone; and the stars, too, began to go out, whispering goodbye, goodbye, taking their leave; until finally only the wind remained, and I could no longer make out any forms in the darkness, only the last glowing ember of a soldier's cigarette.

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XI--21 JULY 1956

everone is acting funning round here I dont know. when mom talks to grampa she doesnt look at him. Las night i had to slep in a new bed because grampa says dont I no im seven year old and Thats No Age to be sleping with your mother. but i not seven yet anyways. everthing look funny this morning when I woke up. Because i remeber I got up and stand on the balcony in my underwere to see if ever thing had a funny color like in my room and it was. you know like those old pitures grampa has on his wall in is bed room. theres one of him and my gramma who died when they got marry. theres one of grampa when he finish the war with his metals on. an mom too when she was small at her firs comunion in her white dress which look yellow because its a old piture. all the pitures don have colors in them only yelow and brown well thats what it look like this morning. like a old piture. weerd. I cound even eat my
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brekfast because i t made me si ck to l ook at i t. So my mother got mad which was funny too because she never does and she pick up my bowl and throw the milk in the street, an my granfather dind say nothing. we had to go to church and I dihd want to go but i dind say so becuse you know why. my mother. at the Church ever one talk and whisper when my mother come into the church and look at her. Father nick tole us a story bout this man name daniol and this old King who had a party. and this hand came out of the wall and write something nobody can read accept danol. and the next morning the King was dead. so while Father nick telling us this story a really weerd thing happen becuse behine him where the cross is well under the cross i seen this long fingers coming out of the wall and they start to right somthihg which i cound read becuse the riting was funy and i thot maybe it was like this for the saints when God show them somthing or maybe God telling me i am just like that old King cause i cound read though i try and try but i just cound and then the riting went away and i cound here nothing any more accept like a fly buzzing in my ear which i wished i was a spidr so i coud rap up that fly and Kill it.

XII--IN THE STATE OF DENMARK

Something funny is going on but young Vittorio can't quite put his finger on it. On Sunday when he wakes up the world has taken on a sepia colouring, like an old photograph. In church fingers grow out of the chancel wall and scrawl something in a script which looks suspiciously like his father's. Hallucinations: but Vittorio, his head full of saints and miracles, doesn't see them that way--they are signs, and Vittorio wracks his brain trying to figure out what they signify.

There are other mysteries. Why do people whisper and glance when his mother comes into the church, and why does no one sit beside her, though there is plenty of room on the long pew, and the other pews are full? And why, in a village where neighbourly visits are pro forma after any sort of crisis or rite of passage, has no one come to visit her since her return from the hospital? Zia Lucia has come for Sunday dinner, it is true, with her daughter Marta, and Vittorio takes heart from seeing his aunt unchanged in her almost vegetal calmness, her apparent disdain, or unconsciousness, of the small ripples which move over life's ocean; but Marta, who has always made Vittorio's skin itch, as if small worms were crawling underneath it, seems more than usually strange and grotesque. Marta has a club foot, the product of intermarriage, and is a little simple besides, and years of hiding her deformities have made her almost invisible--she moves through a room like a shadow, and when she sits it is as still as a stone, only her eyes moving, darting in their sockets as nervously as a bird's. But Vittorio, who knows what it means to see but not be seen, feels for a moment as if he has crawled

up inside Marta's eyes, from where the world looks oddly warped and unstable, like something seen through a piece of curved glass.

Then finally, on the third day, two other visitors come to the door. The door, they find, is already open, the boulder rolled aside, but inside are no angels, only Cristina and young Vittorio kneading dough for their daily bread. Still being given them despite various crimes.

Visitors announced by two long shadows on the floor: enter Maria Maiale and Giuseppina Danello, childhood friends to Cristina, also her second and third cousins respectively. Maria and Giuseppina, now blocking fresh air and sunlight with their large peasant forms. Laundry tubs perched on their hips, knuckles chafed from the scrubbing. Oh, that peasant life, diurnal, eternal, 'Wash the clothes,' says Maria, 'haul the water make the bread feed the goats *per l'amore di Cristo* let me rest my limbs for a minute'; and so saying she moves into the stone coolness of the kitchen and sets her tub on the table, then drags a chair from near the fireplace and straddles it backwards, in the manner of young men in bars. She rests her thick arms on the back. Her flesh, its tremors receding, comes to uneasy rest, while Giuseppina keeps her place by the door.

'I don't think I can stay,' says Giuseppina, but she does, just where she is.

Mothers in this village--and these are mothers, there's no mistaking that, notice for instance the bleached diapers in the laundry tubs, the boy-child knickers, the dollish socks--form a class: ruddy, swollen hands, crude peasant clothing of home-spun wool, hair short and tucked under a kerchief, round bellies protected with aprons of burlap or grey

linen, like sacks of wheat. They walk with a slow, shuffling movement, arms akimbo, most of the movement coming from the hips--elephantine, almost, except that elephants don't have hips, or hands to put on them. The walk has evolved from long years of carrying water-filled jugs on the head: the bottom half of the body adjusts to all the undulations of the road, while the top remains regal, poised, a posture fit for the courts of queens.

But Maria and Giuseppina are not court ladies, or queens: they have both married local contadini, have both borne several children, have both completed the rite of passage from the small freedoms of frail adolescence to the daily toils of peasant motherhood.

Vittorio: kneels on a chair beside his kneading mother. His brownish hair has not been combed this morning; his eyes still have sleep in them. Sometimes he leans against his mother's hip, feels the muscles moving as she works. He helps by pouring water or sifting flour when his mother asks. To Maria and Giuseppina, Vittorio is more or less invisible.

Maria: has pulled her chair several feet away from the table, is in fact almost half way to the door. She sits with her thick legs distended before her; bulging veins lead like purple highways to the high lands of her hips. Her breasts and belly, merged to a solid front, jut against the back of her chair like a cliff wall. Despite a coolish mountain breeze blowing in through the door, a line of sweat has collected on the dark down above her lips. She talks, gesticulates, shifts her weight a bit. The chair protests; to silence it Maria lifts a foot onto its crossbar. Now Vittorio can see the marbled fat of Maria's

inner thigh.

Giuseppina: still stands near the doorway, etched out by morning sunlight. In Giuseppina you can still mark a distinction between breasts, belly, hips. But maybe only her clothes hold her together: there's a suggestion that any minute her flesh might burst its restraints and revert to formlessness. Her legs, though, taper strangely to thinness: top heavy construction, not stable. Giuseppina is shifting her weight from peg-leg to peg-leg, like a sheep on rocky ground. Talks little, tub still perched on her hip.

Cristina: kneads her dough, gathers it up, stretches it out, works her palms and knuckles into its fleshy surface. She is wearing a light sweater, its sleeves pushed up above her elbows; the sweater has a habit of catching her curves as she moves. Now the roundness of a breast as she brushes a strand of hair from her eyes with the back of her hand; now the feline curve of her back as she arches over the rolling board. The dough thickens, retains the impression of her fists; she kneads with increasing aggression. A bead of sweat forms on her brow, drops into the salty dough.

Maria has been talking peasantries, using metaphors Vittorio doesn't understand. Something about Antonella, Alfreddo Catalone's daughter, down in the pasture with Antonio Girasole; something else about a priest in Tornamonde breaking a commandment, Maria doesn't say which one. But here Giuseppina breaks in.

'You're always making fun of the priests.' Her thin, whiny voice comes from some high place in the nose, not the place where angels sing but where the wind whistles around craggy precipices.

Cristina: 'Why should you defend the priests? They're no better than the rest of us.'

'You're too proud,' says Giuseppi, 'even when you were young. When's the last time you went to confession?'

'What does confession have to do with it?'

'Cristina doesn't need the priests.' Maria, when she speaks, always seems about to squeal into laughter. 'She's going to get to heaven by climbing to the top of an olive tree.'

'When I climb an olive tree,' says Cristina, picking up the dough and slamming it against the rolling board, 'it's to pick the olives.'

And so it goes. Vittorio can't follow. His knees are getting sore, so he climbs down off his chair.

'Giuseppi,' his mother says, 'why don't you come in and sit down? Whatever I have it's not contagious.'

Vittorio sees Maria shift in her chair and shoot a glance back at Giuseppina: for a moment a veil seems to drop. What lurks behind that dark glance, beneath those words that Vittorio can't understand? And why does Giuseppina mumble her goodbyes now and hurry off down the street, Maria shortly to follow? What is our young Hamlet missing?

Two days later, tending sheep on the slope beneath Colle di Papa, Vittorio hears voices coming from the fountain. His mother's name is mentioned. Vittorio has to climb a steep slope to get up to where he can see the road and the fountain. When he gets to the top, he peers over the edge and sees Maria and Giuseppina filling their water jugs. He keeps low.

'You know what they're saying about her in Rocca Secca,' he hears

Maria saying. 'As if everyone was blind. Walking around like a princess.'

'God will make his judgements,' says Giuseppina. 'It's not for nothing she was bitten by a snake.'

'What does the snake have to do with it?'

'I didn't see *you* getting too close to her the other day,' says Giuseppina.

Maria grunts.

'It's her father I feel sorry for,' she says, after a pause. 'And Vittorio. Growing up like a weed. Do you ever see him getting up at four to help with the harvest, like my Vincenzo? *Mai, mai.* He and his mother play like schoolchildren all day. Someone should write to the boy's father. I have a mind to do it myself.'

'Worry about your own troubles,' says Giuseppina, but by this point Vittorio is already tumbling down the slope, out of control, missing the grips, scraping over rocks and brambles, a small avalanche of frenzied flesh. Then he is running, running, across the pasture, past the scattered sheep and on, falling finally from exhaustion and flopping on the grass like a beached fish, his throat choked with tears and rage.

Oh, that one may smile, and smile, and be a villain. But who was the villain?

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XIII--TOTEM AND TABOO

Totemism, according to Freud, generally died out with the domestication of animals, another victim of secularizing economics. But in Valle del Sole in the year of our Lord 1956 no one had heard yet of Freud, or of the great changes he had wrought on the twentieth century mind; did not know that saints, their palms rent and bleeding, their bodies convulsed as they fought off demons, had become simple hysterics, possessed only by their own tortured consciences; did not know that a world once full of symbols and spirits, of large forces which wove all lives and destinies into the warp and woof of a single cloth, had become simply an empty screen, one whose colourful pageant was only the projection of minds desperate for meaning. No, in Valle del Sole these things had not been heard of yet, and *fortuna*, fate, still moved in its changeless ways, its agents well-known, slithering between rocks and crevices in the sultry heat of an August noon; and vestiges of ancient rites--rites which hearkened back to prehistory, when every tree and brook had had its presiding spirit, and animals were gods incarnate--such vestiges remained inscribed in the souls of the villagers, though it had been a long time since the first ox had been yoked, or the first sheep been tamed by a shepherd's stick.

For many these ancient remnants of spirits and forces that could not be dealt with under the normal theology found their focus now in the evil eye. No less a man than *Il Duce* himself had feared the eye, and even Pope Pius XII, it was rumoured, had once banished a monsignor from the Vatican for possessing it. But despite its name, the evil eye was

an ambiguous thing, something which stood outside the normal categories of good and evil, subsumed them; was, again despite its name, an almost blind thing. It struck both the righteous and the depraved, did not make such nice distinctions, was drawn towards you merely by a certain lack of vigilance, a small flouting of fate, a little crack in the door it might slither through, fangs bared, to catch you by surprise. It was nothing more and nothing less, finally, than fate itself, and fate knew no masters, neither God nor the devil, and could not be appeased as easily as they when aroused; and fate's agents, who carried the sting of these tremendous forces in the hollow of a tooth, were inevitably forbidden things, like the totems of old, taboo, and thus dangerous to the touch--because taboo, like disease, spread by contagion.

Perhaps taboo, then, explained why the neighbours, after my mother's return from the hospital, turned their eyes away and moved to the centre of the street when they passed her sitting in front of our house; why no one stopped in anymore on the way back from the fields to have a word with the *podestà* about the condition of the roads or the pilfering of the communal forest where the villagers collected firewood; why my mother began more and more to keep to the house, spending her days knitting by the fireplace, or sometimes simply shut up in her room; why a strained silence was falling over our household; so that only words of formality passed now between my mother and my grandfather.

Any villager could have told you, of course, that the antidote for snake venom could be had in any hospital, sealed in small bottles that came from Rome, and that for most purposes the antidote seemed to be effective; and few would have admitted, in so many words, that the world

these days was overseen by anything other than a watchful, well-intentioned deity who followed detailed laws well-documented by the church, so that even a snake, if it struck, was at most simply an agent of divine retribution, its old ambiguities stripped away. But when an offer of cure came, to purge my mother of an ailment no doctor could see, the cure suggested was an old one. A perversion, perhaps, of true totemic rites, those yearly sacrifices of the totem when all partook of the totem's flesh--immune on that day only from its power--to commemorate thus, in the ambivalent way of savages, an ancient crime, the murder of the primal father. Though fate, too, might have once been a murdered father, and hence his sulky inconstancy, his quickness-to-anger, his children's vigilant fear; and the cure that was offered, even if not quite correct in its details, shared perhaps some kinship with that old rite.

It was Giuseppina, prim, prudish, and wary, but concerned enough about her childhood friend to risk possible censure in coming to see her, who came finally, to offer my mother a last resort, a back door to forgiveness when the broad front portals seemed barred. She came about a week after I'd overheard her and Maria at the fountain, while I lay on my winged bed idly leafing through the grade one reader la maestra had made me take home for the summer. My mother was downstairs in the kitchen.

'Are you alone?' I heard from downstairs, and despite the attempted hush I recognized Giuseppina's thin warble.

'Yes,' my mother responded. 'What is it?' My mother's voice had taken on a hard edge in the past few days.

'Where's your father?'

'He's up at Di Lucci's. Where he always is.'

'And Vittorio?'

'What's the big secret, Giuseppi? What are you so nervous about? Come in and sit down and say what you have to say.'

'You know what I have to say,' Giuseppina started. 'How can you sit there sewing your socks?'

'They have holes in them.'

A p a u s e .

'Cristina,' Giuseppina started again, 'you and I were like sisters when we were small. You know that, I wouldn't do you any harm. But other people are not so kind. They like to see a person destroyed. You're too young and beautiful. You can't afford to walk around like a princess. It turns people against you.'

'So what should I do? Should I make myself ugly, to make other people happy?'

'You know what I'm talking about, Cristi. You have to make a gesture. You should make a confession. You should go and speak with Fa- t h e r - - '

'Please, Giuseppina, you know I don't have any use for priests.'

There was a pause. I had slunk out of my room by now and was crouched guiltily at the head of the stairs.

'Look, Cristi,' Giuseppina went on finally, her voice so low now that I could barely hear above the sound of my own pounding heart, 'if you won't see the priest you should at least make an offering.'

'What are you talking about?' my mother said.

'It worked for my cousin in Rocca Secca,' Giuseppina continued, her voice still low and eerie. 'You have to take a chicken and drain the blood in a pan. Then you cut out the heart to put it in your soup later, to give you strength, and you wash your hands in the blood. You pour the blood in the ground and say the words, "This is not chicken blood but my blood, which comes out of me like a river to the sea." Then in the same place where you poured the blood you make a pile of branches, and you burn the chicken on top of it. If you--'

But my mother burst suddenly into laughter.

'You're not serious!' she said good-naturedly, still laughing. 'A good God-fearing woman like you talking to me about these *stupidaggine*! I thought you had more sense than that.' But when Giuseppina spoke again a nagging severity had returned to her voice.

'I warn you, Cristì, you'll bring a curse on everyone around you. It's only for your father that people have kept quiet until now. But with the snake everyone has started to talk. I didn't want to say it but you force me to, you think that people are fools, that they don't see the way you carry on. But you know the name that everyone's calling you, I don't have to tell you what it is. You have to make a gesture.' A moment later the front door banged shut.

Later, when I came down from my room to the kitchen, my mother made no reference to Giuseppina's visit. She didn't seem surprised that I'd been upstairs, that I might have overheard their conversation. If she had done anything wrong, she wasn't making any attempt to hide it from me. I could almost believe, therefore, that she *hadn't* done anything wrong, that something wrong instead had been done *to* her, by

that snake in the stable.

But which snake? Why had the world become so suddenly complex, so that it was no longer possible to put things together in simple cause-and-effect ways? Even God, in his invisibility, was simpler than this, had rules he followed that could be known, through the lives of the saints and the sermons and stories of Father Nick. But now it seemed there was a whole underbelly world that could be known only through chance glimpses and snatches of overheard conversation, that was full of strange unexplained things, sharp blue eyes and tinted glasses in the straw, fingers crawling out of walls, sidelong glances, hands washed in the blood of a chicken. Two worlds, not one--the first plainly visible to the naked eye, a world of the obvious, even though its guardian was elsewhere, up in the clouds; the other hidden and dark, made known, like the path of a snake, only by a rustle of grass and the whisper of a flickering tongue.

The snake, of course, had long been the intendant of underworlds, first banished there, perhaps, by those few damning lines in Genesis; and the efforts that had been made to recall it from exile, by those Gnostic sects that had flourished in the early days of the church, the Ophites, the Naassenes, the Peratae, meeting in the catacombs and damp cellars of Rome and Alexandria to proclaim their heresies, that the God of the Old Testament was a deluded usurper, his creation a mistake, and that the Snake, coiled around the Tree of Knowledge, tail in mouth, ouroboros, was the first Gnostic, promising Eve the truth that could set her free--those efforts had been quickly crushed under the church's broadening juggernaut, until the last of the Gnostics had been wiped

from the earth, their beliefs surviving only in the attacks that had been made against them by the church fathers and in the scattered fragments of texts they'd buried in hillsides, in earthenware jars. But the snake, too, had once had its moment in the limelight, when it had basked openly on flat, sun-drenched stones, had had no need to hide itself in crevices and grass--back in a time before Genesis, when the warrior hordes of the north were still battling their own primal fathers, had not yet drifted south with their rape and pillage to taint the myths there, rewrite them in their own image; a time when in the cradle of the world, on the shores of the Euphrates and in Mesopotamia, Canaan, Babylonia, all lips had called out a single word, Ashtoreth, had sung it from the temples and from the mountains, and the Snake had been the goddess's staff, no phallus then but the power of woman incarnate--a power reduced by the accretions of time to a whisper, till it was almost lost from the earth.

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XIV--LUCIANO

On my seventh birthday, my mother took me into Rocca Secca. We walked hand in hand, in the cool damp of early morning, up to the main road. The sun was just rising over Colle di Papa, round and scarlet, sucking in dawn's darkness like God's forgiveness, the fields all the way down to the valley slowly changing from grey to gold. Some of the villagers had already preceded us; their small, bent bodies dotted the

countryside, and the road was rife with fresh droppings from sheep and mules.

The bus into Rocca Secca was actually a battered little pickup, the back fixed up on three sides with splintered planks for seats and covered with a dusty canvas. The truck, owned and operated by a small, swarthy entrepreneur called Cazzingulo (a nickname meaning 'balls in your ass'--what usually happened when you rode in his truck), plied the road between Capracotta and Rocca Secca, swallowing and spitting out passengers en route, rolling to the rhythm of the road. Cazzingulo didn't follow a schedule you could measure on a watch--he never left his point of departure until he had a full load, full by official standards, which didn't mean he couldn't fit in another eight or nine passengers after he'd passed the police post on the edge of town--but somehow the peasants always sensed when he would be passing, as if they could feel premonitory tremors in the earth. It was only a few minutes after my mother and I reached the main road that a cloud of dust rounded the curve of a slope, and Cazzingulo's truck appeared in the middle of it.

'Oh, Cristi!' Cazzingulo called out. He knew everyone in the region by name. 'Rocca Secca! Special today, the little boy rides for half price if he sits on your lap. And you ride for free if you sit on mine.'

About a dozen passengers had already been crammed into the back, feet resting on handbags, produce hampers, grain sacks, bags of onions, people's knees jammed up against their faces and their limbs tangled hopelessly with those of their neighbours in the small bit of communal space between the seats. But after some jostling and cursing, a shout

up to Cazzingulo about greed and the suffering of peasants, and a few invocations to God, a patch of bare wood appeared finally on one of the benches, and my mother eased herself onto it. I wedged myself between her legs, clutching onto her knees and crouching unsteadily on a sack of onions; then the all clear was sounded and the truck took off with a lurch, leaving a swirl of dust in its wake.

Rocca Secca was a town with a cloud over it, too drab even for shadows. It claimed to be the site of the famous Samnite fortress Aquilonia, and it's daily newspaper was named after that ancient city; and it had once been a great centre, renowned for its goldsmiths and bronzeworks, its lawyers and doctors, its poets and priests. But in the nineteenth century, after the unification, it had been bypassed as a site for the provincial capital, and since then its fortunes had steadily declined: its goods had become too expensive to produce and, in the absence of roads or rail lines, too hard to export to other parts of the country or abroad; and its population had been decimated by emigration. In the thirties the people of Rocca Secca had combined to build, at tremendous expense, their own rail link, with the help of rich *paesani* who had made good in America and Argentina; but the Germans had destroyed it during the war, and it had never been rebuilt. Since the war emigration had continued steadily, and you could see the town centre slowly emptying, every month another house boarded up, its residents gone off to Buenos Aires or Melbourne or to small nameless towns scattered through Canada and the United States.

For all that, though, Rocca Secca's streets were filled with life, compared to the other towns in the area--mule carts and motor cars, men

in suits and women in high-heeled shoes, coloured awnings over sidewalk cafés, shop-windows crowded with posters. But you had the feeling that it had all been carted in, put on for your benefit just a few minutes before your arrival, that as soon as you turned your back the show and glitter would fade into the walls and the wind would whistle through empty streets. And maybe this feeling accounted for the reputation Rocca Seccans had in the area as people whose surface smiles hid a meanness of spirit. 'Ho, signõ!' a friend from Rocca Secca would call out to you, his smile promising bounty and revelry, 'have you eaten yet?' And if you had, he'd say, 'That's too bad, my wife just made a feast fit for a king,' and if you hadn't, 'Then go home and eat.' That was how people in the villages spoke of Rocca Secca.

The only part of the town which seemed real, in fact, was the market, perhaps because the market was honest about its transience. After all, it *had* been carted in: carried over mountain paths by peasants and traders who'd hitched up their carts in the dead of night; set up in the wee hours of the morning, the grains and greens and slabs of meat all spread out on the rickety wooden stalls; building to a crescendo as the sun inched it way up the morning sky, the shouts, the laughter, the clatter of coins, the braying of donkeys; then faded and finished by afternoon, the noise and colour gone, only the boarded-up stalls and the scraps of paper whirling in an eddy of wind.

It was at the edge of the market that we disembarked that morning, at that hour still in full swing, the din of it reaching us under our canvas as the truck pulled up to a stop on a small side-street. I'd been to the market many times before I'd started school, but for a long

time now my mother had preferred to make her trips into Rocca Secca alone. Now she led me up to the main market street, into its noise and confusion, its traders' cries and buyers' protests, its goats and sheep and jostling carts, its thick-set town women come for the day's provisions, its mud- and dung-stained cobblestones. We threaded our way through the crowd, my mother stopping to talk and haggle with the traders, picking up a kilo of fly-covered beef from the meat seller, a balloon-shaped provolone from the cheese man. Some of the merchants remembered me from when I used to visit the market. 'Vittõ!' they called out, '*ma come ti 'sei fatto grande! E bello, anche, come la m a m m a .*'

'It's his birthday today,' my mother told them. 'He's coming to collect his gifts.' And this would be good enough for five or ten lire, the coins collecting hard and tinny in my pocket as we made our way through the market. But though my heart lifted as each coin joined its brethren in my pocket and jingled there its content, the market seemed more than usually oppressive today, the streets a little too narrow, the crowd too thick. Somewhere above me was the level of human intercourse, and beyond that the sky; but I was crawling along the market's underbelly, down with the chickens, the sewer stench, the goat dung, the rivulets of murky water which passed between the gaps in the cobblestones. Sightless torsos kept running into me, pushing their bellies and crotches into my face; great heaps of cabbages and onions, piled atop the sloping shelves of the market stalls, seemed to conspire against me, threatening to burst their barriers and crush me to the pavement. My stomach had started churning, and I felt the remnants of my breakfast

forcing their way up into my throat.

'Mamma,' I said, pulling on the wicker sack my mother was carrying her purchases in, 'I want to go.'

She was talking in a low voice to a tall, husky, older man, someone I didn't recognize; she stood very close to him as they talked. The man was dressed in white shirt and tie, but the tie was loose and the upper buttons of his shirt were undone, so that the curly hair of his chest showed; his sleeves were rolled up to the top of his thick forearms.

'Here,' my mother said, interrupting her conversation, 'I'll get Luciano to carry you piggyback. He can buy his vegetables later. You don't open till noon, *vero*?'

'Yes, but by then all that's left is what they feed to the pigs,' my mother's friend said. 'My wife will break my balls if there's as much as a bruise on an olive.' But he smiled, gathered me up in his sinewed arms, and lifted me effortlessly onto his shoulders. He grasped my calves tightly under his upper arms while I held on to his head to steady myself. His hair, cut close to the head and flecked with grey, felt reassuringly soft under my hands.

'I'll bet you can see the whole world up there, eh Vittorio,' he called up.

It certainly was a different prospect. From up here the market looked like a sea or a river, waves of bobbing heads held in by the sloping shores of the corrugated tin roofs which covered the market stalls. Through this sea I passed now unhindered, borne along by this sturdy stranger. But I was not ready to be friendly yet.

'How do you know my name?' I said.

'Oh, I know all about you,' said Luciano. 'Your mother tells me everything.' I felt his head turn towards my mother, who was walking beside us, but she said nothing.

'You don't know what day it is today,' I said.

'Of course I do. It's the feast of St. Bartholomew.'

'No,' I said, 'it's my birthday.' And having scored a point, I felt my resentment subsiding.

'*E vero*?' Luciano said. 'Why didn't you say so?'

We had reached the edge of the market, walked past the last stall. From here the street led towards the square; I could see the open brightness of it beckoning a few hundred yards ahead of us. But after walking a bit further, Luciano turned down a narrow, deserted side-street, walked down a ways, then stopped. From here the sound of the market reached us only as a hum, punctuated occasionally by a shout or a peal of laughter. Luciano slid his hands under my arms and lifted me off his shoulders and onto the ground. My muddy shoes had left two large smudges on his white shirt, just under the armpits. My mother, who had set down her bag and taken a seat on some stone steps, smiled up at Luciano.

'Explain those to your wife,' she said. 'You shouldn't wear white if you can't keep clean.'

'You sound like a priest,' said Luciano.

Now Luciano looked down at me and reached into his pocket.

'Something for the birthday boy,' he said, and when he pulled his hand out of his pocket he was holding a large silver coin. He motioned me out of the shadows into the centre of the street, then held the coin

before me so it reflected some of the sunlight coming over the roofs of the old buildings which flanked us.

'It's an old one lire,' he said to me. 'From before the war, when you could still buy something with one lire.' He leaned over and held the coin close to my eyes, pointing to the date. It was printed in tiny numbers under the right claw of an eagle: 1927. Then he pointed to the eagle's left wing, which was marred by an indentation.

'I want to tell you something about that mark,' Luciano said, closing his fingers around the coin like a magician. My eyes followed his hand as he turned to my mother. '*Per favore, signorina*, let me share your bench.'

My mother slid across the stone and pulled her feet up onto a bottom step, wrapping her arms around her legs and resting her chin on her knees like a young girl. Luciano sat down beside her, broadly, one leg forward and the other draped over the side of the stairway. He motioned me up against his knee and put an arm around my shoulder, conspiratorial.

'I found this coin,' he said, holding it between thumb and forefinger, 'in a field in Greece. During the war. It must have slipped through the pocket of one of the other soldiers, because I saw it shining in the mud in somebody's footprint. So I picked it up and put it in the pocket of my shirt. Who knows what I was thinking. Here we were marching against the enemy, bullets flying everywhere, and I stop to pick up one lire off the ground, like a schoolboy.'

Luciano turned his head to see if my mother was listening. Their shoulders were nearly touching.

'And then?' my mother said.

'Well, we had a hard time that day,' he went on, turning back to me. 'We lost the battle, and many of my friends were killed. It was like a bad dream. But that night, when I was sitting in my tent, I noticed a hole in my shirt pocket, like a bullet hole. Then I remembered the coin I had picked up in the middle of the battlefield, and when I took it out of my pocket I noticed the mark on the eagle's wing. That's when I realized that this coin had saved my life. Without it the bullet would have gone straight into my heart.'

My mother laughed. 'Is that true?' she said, tugging Luciano's hand towards her to get a better look at the coin.

'Every word of it,' Luciano said, 'by Jesus, Joseph, and Mary. Ever since then I've carried this coin with me everywhere, for good luck. But now,' he said, looking at me with eyebrows raised, 'I'm going to give it to you.'

With a broad gesture Luciano placed the coin in my palm, then sat back to let me admire it. It was much heavier than the tinny five and ten lire pieces I had been collecting, heavier even than a fifty lire. I rubbed the coin with my thumb, feeling its thickness and weight, the texture of its detailed surface. An intricate pattern of feathers stood out in relief on the eagle's outstretched wings. On the obverse side, in profile, was a bald-headed bust, muscle lines showing on its face and neck.

'You see,' Luciano said, watching me, 'it even has your name on it.'

He pointed to the inscription etched around the coin's circumference, not the usual 'Repvbblica Italiana' of newer coins but the words

'Vittorio Emanvele III Re e Imp.,' carved cleanly out of the heavy metal in bold capitals. I knew enough about history to know who Vittorio Emanuele was; and I doubted, too, that fortune could be as simple as Luciano had made it out, could be passed along from one person to another, and depend on something as easily overlooked as a hole in your pocket. But a part of me--the part that believed in saints in miracles, in the tales of olden times that my grandfather told, in the ghost stories people whispered of midnight visits to the cemetery--clung to the hope that this coin now weighing heavily in my hand, and bearing my name, might possess a secret magic.

For the time being my moment in the spotlight was over and I became invisible again, though I was still leaning against Luciano's knee.

'He came to Valle del Sole?' Luciano was saying, his voice almost a whisper. 'Christi, you're tempting the devil.'

'What could I do?' my mother said calmly, staring at her hands in her lap. 'A letter came in the morning, he came in the afternoon.'

'Someone must have seen him,' Luciano said. 'I hear people are beginning to talk.'

'Let them talk.'

'He told me before he left that someone from the embassy had come looking for him. Did he tell you that?'

'Yes,' my mother said.

Luciano shook his head.

'After twelve years they haven't forgotten. The Italians would have lost his file years ago. And it's not as if they won the war. If he went back home now he would probably be a hero for doing what he

di d.... Di d he say where he was goi ng?'

'What do I care where he goes? Milano, Switzerland--I haven't heard anything from him. Anyways I have my own troubles to worry about. I hope he didn't leave me a little gift--he got very excited when he saw that snake.'

'And the snake on top of everything. You know I'm not superstitious, Cristi, but a snake is a snake--'

'Don't be foolish. The snake was a stupid accident.'

Luciano shifted on the stone step. I moved away from him but he didn't notice.

'Still,' he said, wringing his thick hands and shaking his head again, 'the villagers. You know how they like to get a hold of a scandal. For peasants like that everything is a sign. Things must be getting hard for you.'

My mother shrugged.

'Look,' Luciano said, 'I have to get my vegetables. Why don't you and Vittorio come around to the restaurant for lunch. On me. I have some good wine from last year's harvest. And a bowl of *tortellini alla bolognese* for Vittorio.'

Luciano leaned over and kissed my mother on the cheek, then stood and put a hand on my shoulder.

'*Ciao*, Vittõ,' he said, and then, walking away towards the din of the market, turned back to call out '*Auguri*!' just before he disappeared around the corner. I was fingering the one lire coin in my pocket, absently, sensing already that the forces of fate had started to churn in ways too complicated for a single silver coin, now covered with

my oily sweat, to make any difference; and I wished that Luciano, whose thick hands and strong arms had lifted me so effortlessly from the market's stench into fresh air and sunshine, had been able to offer me something more, in the end, than a story.

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XV--*GIARDINI* GIARDINO

The last remnant of Rocca Secca's baronial past sat on a lonely hill on the outskirts of town--the Giardino estate, now maintained by the state as a zoological garden, but once the seat of the most powerful family in the region, who owned half the land from Rocca Secca to Capracotta. The family had been in that part of the country for as long as anyone could remember, and had survived wars, rebellions, and even the end of feudalism with their fortunes intact (the Giardinos had seen the end coming, and had sold all their land off to other landowners in the last years of the eighteenth century; then, when feudalism had been abolished and the state had seized all the baronial lands, the Giardinos had waited for the bottom to fall out of land prices and then repurchased all their original holdings, picking up also many parcels that had been confiscated from the church). But in the disease-ridden years of the 1800s, after all the hardships the family had successfully survived, the Giardinos were beaten finally by invaders smaller than the heads of pins: by the last years of the century a dynasty had more or less run its course, stricken down by cholera, typhoid, malaria, and a
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host of other infectious diseases. So in the year 1894, in his thirty-second year just having buried his own wife and child, Alberto Giardino, direct descendant and heir, found himself at the end of a long line of feudal lords, his family wiped out even to the third and fourth cousins.

Alberto Giardino mourned for a time, cursing both God and men and vowing he would spend the rest of his life cut off from the affairs of the world. But when a friend from Rome came to see him and told him of the campaign which was being launched in Abyssinia, Giardino felt some of the old passions of his youth rising in him again: Giardino had been in his early days a great admirer of Garibaldi and--this despite Italy's entry into the Triple Alliance in 1882--an impassioned irredentist. Now, his vision blurred by personal tragedy, and by the knowledge that his line was dying out, he began to confuse a healthy longing for a strong and united Italy with an itch for empire, a dream of return, return to the days when all the western world had suckled on Rome's bosom.

After a private meeting with Prime Minister Crispi in Rome, Giardino found himself in 1895 on the scrubby plains of Eritrea at the head of a rag-tag band of peasants, ex-convicts, and rogues. In his twenties, Giardino had served as a petty officer in the Italian army; but he had always been more fond of spectacle than strategy. He loved the geometric precision of a marching battalion, feet all rising in harmony and then hitting the earth with a unified thud, the polished boots, the shiny brass, the *tricolore* waving slowly in the wind. And now he spent more time teaching his motley battalion how to march in time to the tune of folk songs than how to shoot straight, perhaps believing

that, through some magic merger of content and form one thing would lead to the other. Then, proud and deluded, Giardino marched his men to their deaths at Aduwa. Just a man from the provinces after all: Italy was defeated, Crispi fell from power, Giardino from favour. Questions arose about Giardino's competence, but he didn't stay around to answer them: he resigned his command, snuck out a back door, and more or less dropped out of sight for the next seven years.

No one knew how Giardino had spent those years. Some said he'd set out in search of the source of the Nile, not realizing that Livingstone had beaten him to it by a quarter of a century; others that he'd met up with a mysterious man named Giovanni Battista who'd set him up as a kind of minor deity on an island off the coast of Italian Somaliland. But one day in 1903 a wizened beggar wound his way down the main street into Rocca Secca, his clothes in tatters, his face bearded and gaunt, his skin darkened to the colour of copper. The townspeople avoided him--a new beggar was not news, just an inconvenience, one more thorn to remind the villagers of their greed and their own poverty. But when the beggar reached the central square, he did something which caused the townspeople to stop and stare in curiosity: he did not seat himself on the church steps along with the other beggars, but went up to the *tomolo* in the centre of the square, a hollowed out stone of three compartments which was used to measure grain for rents and taxes. Then, as a small crowd began to gather, he untied the crude rope which held up his tattered pants, dropped the pants down to his knees, and touched his bared buttocks to the cool stone.

In Rocca Secca, this gesture had a long tradition: it was the way

in which a man who had exhausted all his resources might publicly declare bankruptcy. The townspeople tittered now and whispered amongst themselves to see this strange beggar, so obviously destitute, make this needless gesture before them. But the stranger paid them no attention, and now he tied up his pants, washed himself at the public fountain, and made his way up the hill that led to the Giardino estate, where finally he pulled a latch key off from around his neck and opened the door to the home where he had spent the first thirty-three years of his life. Everything was in a state of extreme disrepair, the servants having sought other employment shortly after Giardino had ceased to provide for their wages. Birds nested in the chandeliers, rats in the sofas, and the house showed signs of burglaries--broken windows, blank spots on the walls from missing paintings. But after eight long years Alberto Giardino was home--a return of sorts, but one with a small r, maybe after all the best he could hope for.

Giardino never explained his long absence to anyone--maybe because, wifeless, childless, parentless, he had no one to explain to--and for the next several years he lived as a recluse, employing only a few servants and seldom venturing off the grounds of the estate. A few times, around twilight, he'd been seen walking through the streets of Rocca Secca, dressed in full regalia, his colourful uniform looking unreal in the drab surroundings. Some of the villagers claimed that Giardino had died, and that it was his ghost that haunted the streets; but his servants testified otherwise. 'He's just crazy,' they said, pointing a finger at their heads and screwing it back and forth. 'The sun fried his brains. He talks to himself.'

But in the spring of 1911 Giardino seemed to gain a new lease on life, and began the project that was to occupy him for the rest of his days. Suddenly he was racing across the country, talking to merchants, importers, ship owners. And by summer all the wheels were in motion, and a great host had begun its trek out of Africa: palms, papaw, ficus trees, snake plants, Zanzibar balsams, Tambookie thorns, blood lilies from the Belgian Congo, flame trees from West Africa, yellow kalanchoes from Italian Somaliland, traveller's palms from Madagascar, all manner of tropical trees, flowers, and shrubs, many of species that had never been named, rooted carefully out of their native African soil by patient tribesmen, ferried lovingly across the Mediterranean by sturdy xebecs, lifted gingerly onto the docks at Termoli by skilled longshoremen, carted charily into the highlands of Molise by specially-trained donkeys, to be deposited finally on Alberto Giardino's front lawn--where they were dead by the end of their first mountain winter.

But by now Giardino was obsessed. The next year he built a large conservatory at great expense, and before the outbreak of the war had managed to stock it with an impressive array of tropical flora. During the war he kept clear of politics and military concerns, bided his time making preparations for the next stage of his project, the fauna, built cages and aviaries, corrals for the big game. And with the signing of the armistice he began putting in orders again, Nile crocodiles, Gaboon vipers, Marabou storks, pink flamingos, green mambas, ring-tailed lemurs, thick-tailed bushbabies, black-backed jackals, grey-cheeked mangabeys, black-and-white colobuses, spotted hyaenas, pygmy chimpanzees, brindled gnus, blotched genets, impalas, cheetahs, pottos, elands. But

again things did not go as smoothly as he might have wished. For one thing, funds were running dry: the era of the big landowners was over, and taxes and his excessive expenditures were ruining him, so that one by one he was forced to sell off his priceless family heirlooms, ancient manuscripts from all the monasteries of Europe, oak chests and velvet divans that had been in his family since the Renaissance, paintings by the Italian masters, sketches by Piranesi, sculptures, precious jewels. Also, customs officials were making things difficult for him, nagging him with health regulations and slapping him with outrageous tariffs. Even the longshoremen, still skilled but no longer so ginger, played their part: they went out on strike the day one of Giardino's shipments arrived in the harbour, and the animals--three gazelles, an assortment of birds, a gnu, and two love-struck giraffes--died on their untended ark, from thirst and homesickness. Giardino, uninsured against acts of God, dropped a bundle.

Whatever garden paradise Giardino had had in his head, it was unlikely he'd succeeded in realizing it on this earth. Still, despite all his setbacks, the wars, the Fascists, the debts and disasters, a few minor earthquakes, the townspeople of Rocca Secca still spoke of the magical aura the Giardino estate had taken on in the latter years of Alberto's life; of lawns that were always green and trim, even in the worst drought; of potted palms and strange flowers dotting the circular front drive in summer, when they were carted out from the conservatory; of Giardino himself, glimpsed sometimes through the front gates as he made the rounds of his estate or trundled across the snow to the conservatory, a bent figure looking old as Adam, dressed in a long black cape

and still humming the songs of his youth. And this magic was enough to allay the townspeople's fears when at night strange jungle sounds arose from the lonely hill on the edge of town, the cry of touracos, the laugh of hyaenas, the screech of monkeys, to fill their dreams with dark, primordial visions. By the time Alberto Giardino finally died in 1949, from a case of tertiary malaria he'd been nursing for over half a century, he had become a legend in the region, and people spoke for miles around of the nobleman who had turned his hill into a piece of Africa.

But the townspeople of Rocca Secca had known for years that Alberto Giardino had never recovered from the bout of madness which had afflicted him after his return from the wars, knew long before two young clerks arrived from Rome to execute Giardino's estate--he had left all his property to the state, on the condition that his grounds be maintained as a public zoo and botanical garden after his death--and discovered the strange entries Giardino had been making in his journals for the last thirty-three years of his life. Giardino, the clerks had been told, had lived most of his last years as a recluse: but the journals were full of names and records of conversations, giving the impression that Giardino had enjoyed an active social life, that his home had constantly been filled with friends and visitors, most of whom had stayed on for years, stayed on, in fact, until their deaths. The journals were filled with these deaths, on the order of about one a month, each one recorded with the same somber formality, its victim buried, the journals noted, 'with full honours.'

But the only graveyard on the estate was the one devoted to Giardino's ancestors; one of the servants mentioned a plot in a back field

where Giardino had buried his dead plants and animals, but the clerks did not bother to inspect it. Something was afoot: the servants claimed that only merchants and delivery men had ever come up to see Giardino, but the journals proved otherwise. Perhaps Giardino had been part of the resistance, the journals written in code and the deaths recording the brutal efficiency of the Fascists in eliminating their opposition--but no, the deaths continued well past the end of Fascist rule. Then another strange discovery: dozens of people who had died in the earlier journals recurred again in the later ones, reintroduced without fanfare, as if they had merely been away on a long journey.

The clerks questioned the servants again. But whether out of some sense of loyalty to Giardino, or out of an innate distrust for any form of officialdom, no one offered any explanation. Several days passed before Giardino's old cook finally came forward and told the clerks what had long been common knowledge around Rocca Secca: that Alberto Giardino, former statesman, soldier, and sojourner, cul-de-sac of a long dynasty of hominid landowners, had talked to his plants and animals. And what is more: they had talked back.

'What did they say?' the clerks asked.

The cook shrugged.

'It's in the journals.'

The matter might have ended there, Giardino's scribblings dismissed as the ravings of a madman, but a few years later a historian named Romolo Dattari began compiling a monograph on some of the personalities involved in the 1896 campaign at Aduwa, and came across Giardino's papers in the National Archives. His study of them culminated in a

biography called *Giardini Giardino*, from which I have gotten much of this information. Among other things Dattari discovered that of the 287 'friends' who appeared in Giardino's journals, all but one bore the names of men who had been killed under Giardino's command at Aduwa. The exception, a 'Calvino' who figured prominently as a confidante in Giardino's last years, remained a mystery--the only connection Dattari could make was that the name had belonged to '*un' aquila calva*,' an American bald eagle, ('calvino,' following a rule for the formation of diminutives, meant 'little bald one') listed among Giardino's inventory after his death, and the sole animal in his possession not of African origin.

Obviously Giardino had been working with some theory of metempsychosis, but he never gave any description of it. Its principles must have formed a fixed matrix in his head by the time he had started the journals; either that or he had lived almost totally in a dream world, and since dreams only needed explanations when you woke from them, Giardino, who had never awoken from his, had never felt any need to explain.

But Rocca Secca was still far from the academic precision of historians in Rome, where Giardino's madness had been neatly analyzed and explained; and with the accretions of time the townspeople had come to speak of that madness in a tone which mixed humour with awe, as if they half-believed in that divinity which, according to the stories, Giardino had once claimed on a island off Italian Somaliland. Though they spoke, for instance, with back-slapping good cheer of the day when Alberto Giardino had bared his buttocks to the *tomolo*, there was always a moment, in the recounting of that event, when people would shake their heads sadly, for now they saw in Giardino's gesture an oracle, the

prediction of their own town's declining fortunes. And Giardino's estate, which when it had been cloistered off from the townspeople's curiosity had been an earthly paradise, and had resounded with the strange cries of wild birds, was never visited by them now, though it was open to the public for a small admission charge: for it too, under the state's care, had gone the way of dreams, fallen into decay shortly after Giardino's death, and from respect for or fear of Giardino's unhappy ghost the townspeople steered clear of it.

My mother, though, either did not know or did not heed the curse which hung over Giardino's lonely hill; for on my seventh birthday, after her strange conversation with Luciano, she led me through the winding streets of Rocca Secca to the outskirts of town, shopping bag in the crook of an arm, and up the long road that led to Giardino's estate. From the gates, though, which squealed with protest when my mother pushed them open, the signs of ruin which kept the townspeople away were clear. The lawns, where flamingos perhaps had once grazed amidst trim hedges and exotic flowers, were now completely overgrown, new growth vying with dead weeds left over from many winters. The old villa had been boarded up, shutters hanging from one hinge, paint on the doors and windows peeling. The conservatory, to one side of the house, had been left to ruin, no domestic jungle in it now; much of the glass had been broken, and the foundations had cracked, veined now with long, gaping fissures wide enough to let light through.

I had been nursing a small excitement as we'd made our way up to the estate, though I had hidden it carefully from my mother in my sulky silence, repaying her for some uncertain injury that went back to that day

in the stable, and which her conversation with Luciano had recalled to me; but now, seeing the ruins before me, that little excitement died too, as if I had felt Giardino's curse weighing down on us as we stepped through the gate.

'Mamma, I don't want to go,' I said, petulant.

'*Basta*, you've been acting like a baby all morning,' my mother said, but then, more gently, 'Come, let's at least see the animals, we've come all this way.' And following hand-scrawled signs that read *giardino zoologico* my mother led me up a pitted, weedy path, past a fountain clogged with rotting leaves and black, stagnant water thick as paste, past statuettes of angels and half-veiled women that had been left to crumble in the weeds, until finally the signs led us around the villa to a large area fenced off by chicken wire and housing the remains of Giardino's zoological gardens. The pathway stopped at a short wooden gate; my mother gave it a shove, and at the creak of the hinges a short old man with a few days' growth of stubbly beard appeared suddenly on the gate's other side, saying '*buon giorno, buon giorno*' with an old man's absent-minded good cheer.

'You're the first visitors we've had in two weeks,' he said as he pulled open the gate. He was dressed in an old pair of sullied overalls that sagged over his shrunken body like folds of skin, forearms sticking like shrivelled branches out of his rolled-up sleeves.

'You don't know what a pleasure it is to have visitors,' he said, taking my mother's hand in both of his. 'And such beautiful ones, too. This place is supposed to be for tourists, but when do we have tourists in Rocca Secca? And the townspeople, with their superstitions.... Since

my wife died it's been very lonely for me here. *Scusi, signora,* it's just a formality but I have to ask you for a small admission charge, it's hardly enough buy a glass of wine let alone pay my wages and feed the animals but it was in the will that the government keep up the place and now they lose a bundle every year but what can they do? Yes, that's it, twenty lire for yourself and ten for the child, *grazie, signora,* what can you buy for twenty lire nowadays? Of course in Giardino's day it was different--I was his gardener, you know, and my wife was his cook. But what can you do? *Moneta!* They have a man working on the case right now, you see if the state doesn't keep up what it says in the will, well then the law says the estate has to go to the next heir. But old Giardino didn't have any heirs, dead every one of them, so in that case the property always goes to the state. So if the state gives up the property, well, then, the next heir is still the state! So this is the question, and they have a dozen people in Rome working on it: is the state in the first case the *same* state as the state in the second case, which most of the people seem to think that it is, so now the problem is this: does the state in the second case, since it's the very same state as the state in the first case, have to keep up the original will? You can see the problem, how complicated it gets when you're dealing with the law, already they're looking at the state in the third case, and the fourth, and the fifth...'

The old man droned on, following my mother and me as we made our way across a weedy gravel path that led to the cages. There were about a dozen of them, warped wooden boxes of various sizes lined at the front with metal bars or fencing and spread out at intervals along a winding

path. Some of the fronts were framed with ornate carvings, serpents twined around vines, strange horned heads that were half animal and half human; but the wood had dried and cracked with age. And here, too, the lawn between the cages was overgrown, and small fountains stood long dead and stagnant.

In the first cage two mangy wolves lay huddled in a corner near a pile of their own droppings. They seemed to squirm under our gaze, began to slink around the cage like beaten schoolboys, their eyes avoiding us. Bald spots in their fur showed scabs and sores.

'They look like they're ready to die,' my mother said.

'Ah, well,' said the old man. 'It's not like it used to be in Giardino's day. Nobody pays for a veterinarian nowadays. When the animals get lice, well, it's not for an old man like myself to go picking them off their skin.'

Most of the cages, it turned out, were empty, or lined only with old straw that had never been cleared away. And the few animals remaining were ones that you could find wild in the countryside--a couple of hedgehogs, a jackal, even a family of rabbits.

'Almost all of Giardino's animals have died off,' the old man explained. 'Heh, in those days the place was a jungle, you couldn't sleep for the noise! But these are just animals the peasants have caught--they bring them here, and I let them steal fruit from Giardino's orchards. While there are still animals, I still get my small wage from the state. But even the birds are gone now.'

The old man pointed to a circular glass building beyond the chicken wire, rising up above the roofs of the cages into a rounded peak. But a

few tall trees inside it had pushed their way up through the panes of glass.

'Every colour you could think of!' the man said, his eyes growing animated. 'Blue, green, red--and an eagle all the way from America, with wings as wide as a road. The old man used to go in there every morning and listen to them sing for hours--he was a little crazy, you know. But now the only birds there are the sparrows that make their nests in the trees in the spring.'

We were coming to the end of the path, where the chicken wire marked off the boundary of the gardens. Against the fence stood a tall cage that rose up about ten feet from the ground. It seemed empty as we approached it, dark and silent; but just as we came up to the front three creatures leapt out of the darkness against the bars of the cage, grimacing and screeching and holding out their scrawny arms. I clutched at my mother's skirt and started back in fear.

'What's the matter?' my mother said, laughing. 'They're just a bunch of monkeys!'

'The last bit of Africa,' the old man said, shaking his head sadly and holding out his hand to one of their outstretched claws.

But these were not what I had imagined monkeys to be. I had thought of them as small, furry creatures, mischievous and playful; but these demons before me, still hurling their screams and abuse, seemed fired with the memory of some ancient injustice, of a dream gone wrong, baring yellowed teeth to us now in mockery and rage.

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XVI --HOSTARIA DEL CACCIATORE

My mother and I ate lunch at Luciano's restaurant, the Hostaria del Cacciatore, its name painted in red on the front window just above the figure of a small hunter with a rifle slung over his shoulder and a hunter's sack at his side. Luciano had a prime location just off the main square, where Alberto Giardino had once bared himself to the hollowed-out *tomolo*. The *tomolo*, though, no longer stood there; in its place, in the middle of what was now a traffic circle, was a tall stone obelisk shaped like an elongated pyramid, a memorial to the townspeople killed in the Second World War.

My mother and I sat at an outdoor table covered with a checked tablecloth, an awning over our heads protecting us from the heat of the August sun. The restaurant was nearly deserted--an older man in a suit sat at one of the other outdoor tables, and through the frilly curtains and plastic vines and leaves that decorated the restaurant's front window I could see a few people seated at tables inside--but we had come before the shops and businesses closed down for lunch and siesta.

After a few minutes a boy of about fifteen, in black pants and white shirt, came to our table. In the heavy set of his body and the strong curve of his jaw I recognized Luciano's features.

'Where's your father?' my mother asked him.

'He's gone out,' he said. 'But he said that I should take care of you if you came.'

He took my mother's order, *tortellini* for me and *trippa con pasta* for herself, and disappeared inside. Through the window I saw

him go through a door at the back of the restaurant. A moment later, a large, rough-featured woman, heavy bosom straining against a black sweater, came bustling out of the same door wiping her hands on an apron, her eyes searching through the front window until they alighted, finally, on my mother and me. She stood for a moment and stared at us through narrowed eyes, then disappeared again through the back door. My mother, who was staring out towards the square, had not noticed her.

'Do you like it here?' she said to me now.

But I was still nursing the silent resentment that had been building in me all morning; building despite the five and ten lire coins I had collected at the market and the large one lire still weighing heavily in my pocket, dwarfing its kin there, that I had got from Luciano; despite my mother's attempts to appease me up by bringing me to the *giardino zoologico* and, finally, to Luciano's. And I would not let go of that resentment now until it had some issue.

'What's the matter with you?' my mother said. 'Your first time in a restaurant and you sit like a stone. Do you have a bug in your pants?'

My mother reached under the table and poked me lightly in the ribs. I started slightly but checked myself.

'*Bè*, do as you want,' my mother said, with a tone of dismissal.

We sat silent. A bottle of wine appeared, set out and poured with great decorum by Luciano's son, then a bowl of *tortellini* and a plate of *trippa* in tomato sauce. We had begun to eat already when I felt the shadow of a large shape looming over us, and looked up to see the black-sweatered woman smiling down on us, wide hands on wide hips, a thin line of moustache overshadowing her smile. A large black wart

stuck out prominently on one cheek.

'*Buon giorno, signora!*' she said in a lilting voice, her wart dancing with each inflection. 'And this must be your little son! *Ma com' è bello! Come ti chiami, ragazzo?*'

She reached down and ran her fingers under my chin. I drew back.

'His name is Vittorio,' my mother said, curt. 'He's shy.'

'Isn't that sweet!' the woman said. 'And so many boys nowadays are little devils. *Diavoli!*'

The woman paused while my mother took a bite of her food.

'And your friend?' she said finally, leaving her mouth formed around the last syllable.

My mother raised her brows as if she had not understood.

'Yes, of course,' the woman went on, forcing a laugh. 'I remember now, he's gone out of town. A shame.... Do you like the way I've made up the *trippa*?'

'I've had worse,' my mother said.

'Yes, Luciano bought it in Tornamonde, you know you can't find good pigs here in Rocca Secca anymore.... But you should be careful how much you eat! A cousin of mine ate *trippa* every day for a week, and she gave birth to triplets!'

My mother forced a smile. Pig tripe was what people in the region fed to grooms on their wedding nights, to insure their potency.

'And did they have little tails, the children?' my mother said, still smiling.

The woman's face darkened for the briefest instance, before she let out a long falsetto laugh.

'Oh, signora, always joking! Well, enjoy your meal. Luciano will be sorry he missed you. I'll give you a good price on the wine.'

'Eat your *tortellini*,' my mother said when the woman had gone, and returned to her own meal with a vengeance. But my appetite had suddenly died. I placed a single *tortellino* in my mouth, chewed down on it, felt the slimy texture of the pasta as it turned to mush between my teeth, the bumpy feel of the little beads of meat that were coming out of it; but my mouth had gone numb, and I tasted nothing. I kept chewing until the *tortellino* had become a thick paste of spit and mush, then swallowed painfully and set down my fork. My mother looked over at me in irritation.

'What's the matter with you, Vittò! Oh! *Basta!*'

'It tastes like shit,' I said.

The words had barely left my lips before my head was wrenched sideways and I felt a sharp, stinging pain on my cheek: my mother had slapped me, hard, my ear ringing from the force of it.

I didn't make a sound. A lump started up in my throat but I swallowed it and kept my lips sealed tight. There were a few people sitting at the tables around us now, but they did not seem to be paying much attention to this typical scene between mother and child. My first instinct, though, was to look up through the restaurant window to see if the wart-faced woman had been watching us; when I could not make her out anywhere I was suddenly flooded with relief, and the pain in my cheek began to recede. Now in silence I picked up my fork and started in on my *tortellini* again, picking away, my eyes trained on the slowly emerging bottom of my bowl, till I had eaten every slimy one of them.

When the waiter came around to collect the dishes, my mother said tonelessly: 'How much is it.'

'But my father told me--'

'Never mind that,' my mother said. 'Just give me the regular price.'

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XVII--*LA MADONNA DOLOROSA*

La Festa della Madonna Dolorosa on the last weekend of September transformed Valle del Sole every year from a sleepy peasant village into a carnival town. Three days of festivities--music, dancing, processions, fireworks--to cap off the summer and celebrate the Harvest. People from neighbouring villages, from Rocca Secca, old residents from Rome and Naples, flocked into Valle del Sole to take part in the merriment. Day labourers working on distant farms took leaves of absence; migrants in the north, in Switzerland, in France, bought third class passages on crowded trains to be home for that weekend. Sometimes even a few *Americani* appeared, planning their return to their home town to coincide with *la Festa*.

About a month before the festival, members of *la comitata della Madonna* went around to each household in Valle del Sole for *la questua*, a collection taken up to pay festival expenses--fireworks, bands, decorations. On these rounds members of the *comitata*, young contadini in their real lives, dressed up in their Sunday suits, usually a
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little too tight or too loose around the waist and too short or too long in the leg, and carried themselves with a strained formality. They arrived in twos, always managing to come by around dusk on a Sunday evening, when lamps were not yet burning and only the fading glow of a cooking fire lit up the villagers' kitchens. They did not enter a house until they had been invited, even if it was the house of a next door neighbour or a close relative, someone with whom they regularly shared long hours over bread and wine; and when they entered it was cap in hand, eyes averted, their necks straining from their too-tight collars and their newly polished shoes blushing red from the light of a fire.

Though contributions to la Festa were considered a communal obligation, like a yearly tax, the poverty of the villagers still made the task of the comitata a difficult one; and though the committee members could feel buoyed up, in their official function, by a sense of their own importance, they could not forget that the next day they would be dressed in their own peasant rags again, driving a donkey or a flock of sheep up the village's muddy streets. But that was why, during these visits, it was important that the committee members not show any cracks in their official personas, so that the ritual of the situation might carry the whole matter off without undue embarrassment on either side. And so, shuffling into darkened kitchens, they made their pitch, summoning up their most proper Italian from where it had been buried in their minds since their army days and reeling off their set speech, the same one every year, though they spoke it as if no one had ever heard it before, as if they were announcing truths which only their comitata, in its infinite wisdom, had had the light to see into to: purposes of the

festival (*'per il divertimento del popolo e per l'onore della Madonna'*); itemized list of proposed expenditures; and a short pitch about each villager's responsibility for the success of the festival and the reputation of Valle del Sole.

It was this last point which truly struck home, and made even the poorest families reach into the little copper pot in which they kept their savings and separate out the expected number of notes without hesitation; for each village in the area, of course, had its own festival during the course of the year, in honour of its patron saint, and ancient rivalries between neighbouring villages ensured that the peasants would go hungry before they would allow their village to be outdone. Village loyalty was still a strong point of honour amongst the people in the region: they saw the universe as neatly divided into two eternally opposed entities, their village and the rest of the world, each entity occupying about the same amount of geographical space in their imaginations. In Valle del Sole, this village loyalty manifested itself in the disparaging stereotypes that had developed of the neighbouring towns: the people of Castilucci were cuckolds or harlots, of Tornamonde thieves or beggars, of Capracotta fools and cretins; of Rocca Secca cheats and dissemblers. Of Valle del Sole, in turn, it was said that the people there would as soon make a pact with the devil as with God, a reference both to the villagers' superstitions and to their penchant for spite and underhanded revenge.

La Festa della Madonna was tied up in these old rivalries in more ways than one. Valle del Sole's original patron saint had been the angel Michael, whose feast day fell on the 28th of September. But

during the 1800s, a cholera epidemic which had decimated the population of Valle del Sole had not claimed a single victim from neighbouring Castilucci. The villagers, jealous that Castilucci's patron, St. Joseph, had had more power than their Michael, applied to Rome for a change of saints. The replacement they chose was the Virgin Mary, whose nativity was celebrated on September the 8th: for while, in heaven's hierarchy, all the hosts of angels were under the direct charge of the archangel Michael, Michael, in turn, was answerable to Mary. And Mary was second only to the Trinity itself, and had a long history of successful intercessions with a God who, like most fathers, was sometimes distant and unapproachable. The church refused the request; but anti-clerical feeling was running so high in those days that the villagers changed saints on their own authority, though they retained the last weekend of September as their time of celebration.

It was these village rivalries, too, which had led to a continual escalation in the lavishness of the celebrations since the war, for though the peasants' fortunes had not changed much since then, those *paesani* who had made good overseas had started pouring their own resources into the festivals, sending back large sums of foreign dollars and pesos to pledge their continuing allegiance to their native villages. And so when in the September of 1956 la Festa rolled around again, rumours were being whispered of a celebration such as had never been seen before in the region, because Salvatore Mancini, who had left Valle del Sole in the 20s to make his fortune in America, had sent the comitata a sum that would have made the Pope himself suck in his breath.

But in my grandfather's household no sense of excitement had been

building. Our kitchen had been strangely silent for that time of the year; for though, as mayor, my grandfather was not de facto a member of the comitata, he presided over its selection in the spring and was usually kept well-informed of its activities as the festival approached and called upon often to settle the committee's internal disputes, our kitchen sometimes alive with heated debate till well into the night. But this year no one had come, to wrangle over the timing of the fireworks or the number of chairs that should be rented from Rocca Secca. And when members of the comitata had come to our door for *la questua*, my grandfather had skipped the ritual *he* normally went through with them--he usually brought out a bottle of *amaretto*, and made sure a solemn ten or fifteen minutes of conversation had passed before he allowed the young men to get around to their business. But this year he had simply handed them the standard donation without fanfare, and they had come and gone in a matter of minutes.

In fact my grandfather was seldom at home now, leaving the house early in the morning to go up to Di Lucci's and coming back only at meal times, when he said almost nothing, just chewed down on his food and then spat into the fireplace when he had finished. When I passed by Di Lucci's once on my way to get some milk on the other side of town, I saw him sitting up on the terrace completely alone, not telling stories or playing cards but simply staring out into space like an old man, as if he had been set out there to be kept out of the way, the way some of the villagers set their aging parents out on upper balconies during the day and left them there mumbling to themselves in the sun and flies. He didn't even call out to me when I walked by, as if he hadn't seen me,

and on the way home I went by way of the treacherous steps that cut up from one end of town to the other through the steep S of via San Giuseppe, so I wouldn't have to pass by Di Lucci's again.

My mother, too, had fallen into silence and invisibility. Since the day at the restaurant a veil had fallen between us, as if we had suddenly become strangers to each other, and could not find the words that might bridge the silence between us. I had nursed this estrangement for a while as anger, then as resentment, then as pride, trying to find some ready shape I might pour my inchoate emotions into; but in fact I could find no anger or resentment or pride inside me, found only confusion and awkwardness, and longed for the silence between my mother and me to end, for things to return to the way they had been before the confusion of snakes and stables. But my mother remained distant. She had developed a sudden interest in the garden behind the house, staying out there sometimes from early morning till nightfall, hoeing, weeding, coming in only to prepare our silent meals. Her hands were beginning to grow calloused and rough, more like a peasant's, and when she came into the house she smelt of dirt and sweat. But the garden, under her silent ministrations, grew daily more lush and healthy, watered carefully now and properly weeded, though the lushness was more show than substance, the quick growth of leaves rather than the fattening of tomatoes and peppers and grapes which were already ripe or ripening by that late time in the season. The *sesse di vacca*--Roman tomatoes, or cow's teats, as we called them--had even opened some new flowers, which beckoned small and yellow from the garden's greenness; but the fruit would never reach its fullness before the first frost.

In those last hot weeks of August, then, and the first cool weeks of September--school did not begin until October--I spent my time solitarily, searching through my imagination for ways of closing myself off from the world. I had seen very little of Fabrizio during the summer--he and his brothers followed their father out to the fields in the morning, and did not return until late in the evening. I'd go out to the fields sometimes to look for him, and he'd show me the rash he'd gotten from a patch of nettles or the scar he'd gotten from the wild swing of a scythe; but whenever I went around, Fabrizio's father, with his long, sour face, would scowl towards the two of us and find some reason to come over and deliver a backhand to Fabrizio's head. So I stopped going around.

Now I spent much of my time in my room, pretending to be looking over my schoolbooks, in the hopes that my mother would come up to check on me (she never did), but really wandering through my imagination, through memories of walks to the river and days on Colle di Papa, through names of faraway places, Buenos Aires, Addis Ababa, through stories of saints and seminaries and ancient jungles, and trying to find some place there I might crawl into, and fade from the world. But inevitably the same weightless spectre would wheedle its way through the fluted passages of my ear and into the chambers of my brain, slowly filling the space there until it crowded out my private thoughts: silence, louder than any noise, had begun its quiet burrowing. Silence issued now from every nook and cranny of my grandfather's house, so void and colourless it seemed to force the very air from my room, to dissolve furnishings and walls and leave me suspended in a pure, electric

emptiness, so volatile that the sound of my mother's hoe scraping against earth below my balcony threatened to shatter the house to its foundations; and though I squeezed my eyes shut and buried my head under my pillow still the silence burrowed into me, resounding in my head like a scream.

The silence, finally, drove me out onto my balcony one day not long before the festival to watch my mother as she bent and toiled in the garden with her hoe. I hoped she would look up and speak to me, but she did not notice me standing above her, and I stood watching her for a long time through the bars of the balcony railing. She had her hair pulled back and tied in a scarf, the way other mothers wore their hair; occasionally a loose strand would fall forward and cling to the sweat on her face, and she would brush it away with the back of her hand or try to blow it out of her eyes by jutting out her bottom lip and forcing her breath up against her face. When she bent forward to pick some weeds out of the dirt her breasts strained against her blouse and the curve of her thighs shimmered briefly into clarity against the green and gold of the valley.

It was a long time before she stopped her work for a moment, leaning against her hoe and reaching a hand up to wipe some sweat off her brow. She must have sensed me standing over her now, because she looked up at the balcony. Our eyes met briefly; but I retreated quickly back into my room. I lay on my bed and buried my face in my pillow, clutching it around me. The silence began to creep over me again, broken only by the renewed crunch of my mother's hoe. It seemed like the world had been cleared free of voices: I had an image of the silence forcing them all

into the dry earth, smothering them there while my mother tried vainly to uncover them with the scrape of a hoe.

I lay on the bed for several minutes, in my mind's eye watching myself as a dozen times I rose up from the bed, went down the stairs and out the kitchen door, and appeared finally at the bottom of the steps that led to the garden. Each time I rehearsed the scene with a different variation: once skipping quite casually down the steps and humming to myself, to take a place beside my mother finally with a shared laugh and a smile; once quite sombre and serious, taking the steps slowly, with my mother bending simply as I came up to her to plant a kiss on my forehead; once hurrying down the steps at full speed, my mother seeing me coming towards her and running up to catch me in her arms. But though I plotted each gesture and movement down to the smallest details, my body refused to believe in the rightness of them, hanging limp and inertial in the electric silence; until finally, on the verge of tears, I rose up desperately from the bed and found myself a moment later at the edge of the garden, hardly conscious how I had got there, within a stone's throw of my weeding mother.

My mother looked up as I came to stand there, and smiled; but neither of us spoke, and after a moment my mother went back to her work. I stood awkwardly at the foot of the stairs, my hands in the pockets of my knickers, not knowing what to do next. If we had had another hoe, I could have gone up to work beside her; but we had only the one. Finally I went up to the edge of the ravine, about fifteen or twenty feet from where she was working, and began pulling up some of the weeds that were growing there, huge weeds with thick lime stocks and wide furry leaves.

There wasn't any need to pull them out, really: they were several feet away from the last row of tomatoes at the garden's edge, beyond the point where they might have stolen away precious water and minerals. But I had suddenly had a vision of what the ravine would look like if all the matted growth and tall grass were cleared out of it, the earth rolling brown and clean down to the trickle at the ravine's bottom, with only a few of the larger trees still clinging to the slope's side, oases of green. In the spring we would plant it with peppers and vines and *sesse di vacca*, the rows stretching straight and trim down the ravine's side.

By my third weed, though, my palms were already growing chafed and sore. The hard dirt around the weed's roots was putting up a stubborn resistance, and my hands kept sliding up the weed's tough stock, becoming sticky and green as the stock's skin wore away against my palms. Finally the earth seemed to tremble a little, and then suddenly the roots tore free and I toppled backwards onto the ground, still clutching the tall weed in my hands. Behind me, my mother's hoe stopped its scraping for a moment, and I heard a restrained chuckle.

I threw the weed away from me, got up, wiped the dirt off the seat of my knickers. I spit on my palms to ease the burning, then approached my next weed. I had just gotten my hands into a good grip when I felt something strike against the small of my back and crumble there, little bits of grit trickling down into the seat of my pants. I looked behind me to see my mother staring at me with a look of innocence, eyebrows raised in question, arms akimbo; and a moment later lumps of clayish earth were flying wildly through the air, and my mother and I were

laughing and screeching as we chased through the garden and trampled over peppers and cow's teats. Still flinging I chased my mother into the ravine, tearing through branches and brambles and stopping only to pick up clumps of dirt. My mother ran before me towards the pasture, laughing, her kerchief coming loose and her hair flowing out behind her. She collapsed finally in the grass, and I caught up and tumbled on top of her, wrestling her arms as they tried to reach under my ribs to tickle me. She had toppled me off of her and had almost pinned me to the ground when my elbow caught her sharply in the ribs and she gave a little cry of pain.

'I'm sorry,' I said quickly, ceasing to struggle and feeling suddenly that all the fun had gone out of our wrestling. But my mother only smiled and rolled off of me, stretching herself out in the grass.

'I guess you win,' she said. She made herself comfortable, spread her hair out against the grass's green, propped her hands under her head. 'Vittorio *vincitore*. You're getting too strong for me.'

I got up and straddled my mother's belly. The hard bones of her hips pushed up against my buttocks.

'So,' she said, reaching up to put her hands on my shoulders, 'are we friends again?'

'Yes,' I said.

'Forever?' But there was a small catch in her voice now, and before I could answer her hands tugged down on my shoulders to pull me against her, and as she rocked me back and forth against her breast a few wet drops rolled down from the corner of her eye.

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XVIII--MOTHER AND VIRGIN

On the Saturday afternoon of the last weekend of September, while the church bells tolled, my grandfather and I made our way under a grey sky to the service that marked the true beginning of la Festa. My grandfather walked more slowly than usual, grimacing more often, his thick-soled shoes seeming to have grown impossibly awkward and bulky. The streets were filled already with small crowds of joking men and with family groups in Sunday best making their way to mass. Some former villagers had arrived from Rome and Naples, their Cinque- and Seicentos parked on the road that led down to the village from the high road; and as my grandfather and I walked up via San Guiseppe, it was these former villagers who called out, 'Ho! *Lu podestà*,' before someone nearby would whisper in their ears and a cloud would pass over their faces.

The night before, my grandfather had made a speech at la Festa's official opening ceremony. The official opening had no entertainment or spectacle attached to it, but most of the villagers showed up for it--not because they were interested in the hour or so of rhetoric with which the various committee members opened the proceedings, but because after the speeches came the final tally of *la questua*, when the villagers learned whether anyone in the village had shamed them by giving an outrageously large sum, or whether they themselves had given more than their neighbours, and thus called the evil eye upon themselves. This year the atmosphere had been particularly charged, since everyone had been anxious to know about the mysterious donation from Salvatore Mancini.

But though my grandfather and I attended the ceremonies, we did not stay for the reading of the roll. As mayor of the town, my grandfather traditionally gave the final speech. And so the previous night he had sat on the bandstand along with the committee members, waiting his turn; but when he rose to speak, standing in the dim light of a few oil lamps and looking very solitary and bent and old between the row of solemn men lined up behind him and the crowd of villagers lined up in front of him, his words were not the usual ones of praise and encouragement for the committee's and the village's efforts.

'*Signor' e signori*,' he started, in a voice as dry as winter, 'since I now have a chance to speak to you all together, I would like to make an announcement. I have served Valle del Sole since 1937, and I hope I have served honourably and justly. But an old man like myself is not someone to be involved in politics. For me it is enough work to walk from my house to the square for a game of cards. There are many young men in the village to take my place. Let one of them step forward, since as of this evening I will be resigning my place as mayor.'

And so, after serving for almost twenty years, *lu podestà* had resigned his post, and no one had tried to stop him as he'd made his way down the bandstand steps and home, only his grandson coming up finally to walk beside him, in confusion and silence. Now, as we walked up the street towards the church, villagers' heads turned towards him, but none of them gave him more than a respectful nod.

The church was almost full when we arrived. I was surprised when I saw that a few spaces had been left open in my grandfather's pew at the front of the church; I had expected that privilege to fall away from him

now. The bells had stopped tolling but people were still entering the church, filling the last pews and spilling into the porch, so that newcomers could no longer reach the stoup to anoint themselves. Finally the crowd reached out into the square beyond the doors, the doors propped open and a cool breeze breathing into the church to whisper over our heads like a spirit, cutting wet and fresh through a heavy must of sweat and old wood and crumbling plaster.

The church at Valle del Sole did not have an organ, and so the cue for the beginning of the service was always the first quivering note of the introit from Father Niccolo as he entered at the back of the church and made his way to the altar. His voice announced him now, and we stood to greet him and join in his song, though he came not, as he usually did, from the door that led to the rectory, but from the square at the back of the church, the crowd there parting to let him pass. He was dressed simply, white surplice and chasuble laid over his black cassock, a round black *zucchetto* on his head, an open psalter in his hands; but today Father Niccolo, like a camel-hair-clad prophet, had been sent ahead only to prepare the way. For all eyes were turned now on the man who came behind him, dressed all in white, the colour of the Virgin (though also, conveniently, the colour of St. Michael), alb and chasuble flowing regally around his tall, imposing form, a short, brocaded mantelet over his shoulders, a white silk stole shimmering so richly around his neck and down the front of his vestments it seemed on the verge of bursting into colour. Monsignor Felano, from Rocca Secca, who had deigned to take a day off from his busy schedule to help celebrate the Feast of Mary in small Valle del Sole. This was an august

occasion, for it was the first time since Valle del Sole had changed its saint that a church official other than the parish priest had had anything to do with the festival. And in honour of the occasion Monsignor Felano had come in full regalia, for suspended over his head on thin poles held by four cherub-faced altar boys he had brought along with him was a tasselled *baldacchino* of ornate purple brocade, shielding his head from the heavens much more thoroughly than Father Niccolo's small black skull cap. There was a brief pause in the procession as the Monsignor's canopy caught on the door frame coming in from the square; but in a moment Father Felano, voice still raised in song, moved on again unperturbed, through the porch and up the pitted marble aisle towards the altar, his long robes flowing to the ground, so that he seemed to be moving on air. His angels, singing also, in honeyed sopranos, moved in synchrony with him, small fists wrapped tightly around metal poles; the narrowness of the aisle, though, forced them to draw in closer together, and for a moment the canopy sagged slightly above the Monsignor's head before the boys tilted their poles and pulled it back into tautness. Finally, at the foot of the altar, the altar boys withdrew and collapsed the *baldacchino* into a corner, and Monsignor Felano took a seat modestly in one of the chancel pews while the Introit wound to a close and Father Niccolo began the service.

Father Nick took us through the Kyrie, the Gloria, the lections, while Monsignor Felano sat calmly in his pew, hands folded on his robed lap, raising his baritone only to join in plainsong with the rest of the congregation. Despite the breeze blowing in through the open doors, Father Nick was sweating, little beads of moisture glistening on his

forehead and temples; a few times he stumbled over his words and his eyes darted nervously to one side, where the Monsignor sat in benign repose. Finally, at the sermon, Monsignor Felano rose and Father Nick retreated quickly to a chancel pew, pulling a handkerchief from a pocket of his robe and patting his forehead discreetly.

His white robes hissing like static, the Monsignor moved towards the small wooden lectern, overpowering it with his great height and breadth. He looked down the slope of a long, aquiline nose towards the congregation, forcing his silent presence out over the pews, and for a moment everyone in the church seemed poised in an absolute stillness, only the wind still breathing in the silence. The villagers, for all their disparaging remarks about the clergy, were still capable of awe and humility when confronted by a man of God--particularly a monsignor, who was one step closer to the deity than a mere village priest. And the villagers were anxious, too, to know what concessions the Monsignor would make to their chosen saint, whether his words, finally, would give official sanction to choices made when their grandfathers were children, and thus end Valle del Sole's long-standing rift with the Holy Powers in Rome.

The villagers were not disappointed, for the Monsignor had not spoken more than a dozen words before the Virgin's name had passed his lips, and their saint had been acknowledged; a wave of relief seemed to pass through the church, like a collective sigh, and now the congregation relaxed into the soothing sound of the Monsignor's words. He began quietly and calmly, though as he warmed to his subject his voice took on a resonance that seemed to amplify his words as they left his lips and

set up little eddies of air around them. And what he gave us in those words was not the Virgin of the New Testament, not a story of angels and wise men and heavenly trumpets, but the forgotten history of a beleaguered but stoic peasant mother.

'She was a woman,' he said, his long-fingered hands folded on the lectern, body held to its full height, 'inscribed with the grace of God. A woman for whom a virgin birth was merely the outward sign of an inner purity. But she was a woman also of flesh and blood, the wife of a simple labourer, such a woman'--and now he brought one hand up, two fingers extended, and gestured broadly across the church--'as you might see walking down a street of Valle del Sole with a tub of laundry on her hip or a jug of water on her head. The gospels tell us of a woman filled with goodness and grace. But there is also a story they don't tell us. They don't tell us'--stepping away from the lectern now and coming down one step from the altar towards the congregation, hands clasped before him--'of the *shame* she must have endured from skeptics who did not believe in a virgin birth. They don't tell us'--slowly increasing tempo and volume, clenched hands jutting forward occasionally in emphasis--'of the *hardships* she and Joseph underwent to feed a family and raise it, the same hardships we all face, the hardships of the poor. They don't tell us'--and now he was beating words out singly like bullets, one hand striking against the palm of the other in time--'of the--mother's--*pain*--she-must-have-felt when her first-born-son was spit on by the crowds and--nailed--to a cross like a common criminal.' Then a pause, like stormy waters grown suddenly calm, and a voice that was almost a whisper saying, 'This, too, is the story of Mary.'

And so, the Monsignor assured us, even a simple peasant woman, without benefit of immaculate conception, could aspire to the paradox of being both mother and virgin. It confused me though, as I sat listening to him; that such important facts had been left out of the bible, and that Mary, who I had always thought of as a haloed woman enthroned comfortably in the clouds, should have had anything to do with washing clothes and baking bread, the two images refusing to coalesce in my head into a single person. I stared as the Monsignor spoke at the plaster Madonna who rested in an arched niche to the right of the chancel, her figure dressed in long, flowing blue and capped with a starry halo, the infant Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes in her lap; and though the paint on her had cracked and begun to peel in places, she still radiated a leisurely, other-worldly calm. And it began to trouble me as I stared that young men were no longer nailed to crosses, and so did not offer their mothers the sort of suffering that seemed important to sainthood; that the holiness of mothers might depend on the holiness of sons, the two linked together in a precarious balance which either, knowingly or unknowingly, could upset; and that my own mother, so recently the symbol of all that was pure and good in the world but now fallen into shadows my small eyes could not pierce through, had not come to church on the Feast of the Virgin, and so risked missing her chance at that Lady's infinite grace.

As soon as the service had finished, four husky members of the comitata squeezed their way through the crowd at the back of the church and made their way up the aisle, carrying a wooden rack normally used to carry coffins from the church to the cemetery, but today pressed into

service for the Madonna. The rack was laid down before her now and she was dragged out of her alcove and set onto it, the congregation still seated and Father Nick waiting patiently on the chancel steps to begin the procession, aspergillum in hand. The Monsignor was seated again in one of the chancel pews; he would not, it seemed, be joining the procession, but he was lending it the use of his baldacchino and of his cherub-faced altar boys, who were struggling now to erect the canopy in the aisle while the committee members tried to squeeze beneath it with their load. The head of the committee, Alfreddo Mastroantonio, an older man who was an uncle of Father Nick's, had come up from his seat to thank the Monsignor for his presence, approaching him on bended knee and bringing his lips to the back of the Monsignor's proferred hand. My grandfather and I were sitting not ten feet away from this interchange. Ordinarily it would have been my grandfather, as mayor, who would have acted as emissary; and no doubt in the past few months he had been deeply involved in whatever negotiations had taken place to ensure the Monsignor's presence. But my grandfather, too, had recently fallen, in the same obscure, confusing manner as my mother; and now Alfreddo left him sitting anonymously in the front pew, did not call the Monsignor's attention to the former *podestà*.

After a few moments the procession got underway, Father Nick in front, walking solemnly towards the exit and sprinkling the aisle with his aspergillum, his voice rising up in song, and the Madonna, seated atop her litter like an ancient queen and covered precariously with a sagging baldacchino, falling in behind him. Soon the aisles were crowded with people sliding out of their pews, the air filled with

praises to the Virgin:

Bella Tu sei qual sole
Bianca piu che la luna.
E le stelle le piu belle
Non son belle al par di Te.

My grandfather and I brought up the rear, he grim and silent beside me as we made our way down the aisle and out the door. The procession was moving slowly, though, and even at my grandfather's pace we were able to keep up with it. It was stretched out already along a wide path that sloped gradually down along one side of the church towards the main square. The grey mass which had been hanging in the air before the service had thickened now, the wind wet and cold. By the time my grandfather and I had brought the tail end of the procession into the square, a light drizzle had begun to fall.

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XIX--PROCESSION

From the square the procession moved down the S that cut towards the lower edge of town. The column had begun to swell as people who had missed the service came out of their homes to join in, lifting sweaters and jackets above their head to shield themselves from the drizzle. Old black-cowled women sitting on second floor balconies made the sign of the cross and moved their lips silently as the Madonna, protected under her brocaded canopy, passed under them. People had crowded in behind my grandfather and me now, though they left enough room to allow my grandfather to swing his cane freely. The songs of the processioners, tinged with a melancholy strain because the tempo was a little slow, echoed dully in the narrow, sloping street:

Your eyes are more lovely than the sea
Your skin as white as ocean pearls
And Your cheeks, kissed by the Saviour, your Son
Are two roses, and Your lips are flowers.

You are as radiant as the sun
And more luminous than the moon
And even the brightest stars
Are not bright when compared to You.

By now the rain had seeped through the shoulders of my suit jacket and I could feel the dampness beginning to creep over my skin. The deposits of dirt that had been left on the cobblestones by the wheels of carts and the hooves of sheep had been flattened by the feet of the

processioners into a thin slick of mud. My grandfather was moving along silently, swinging his cane with a stiff, determined rhythm; but I had started to sing, raising up my own small soprano into the medley of voices around me. Church songs seemed to touch some part of me that was normally hidden and closed off, something that crouched down inside me withered and small until the moment when it might spring up and fill me. If I knew at all, at that age, what it meant to love God, it was only when I sang that I knew it, when I did not have to think the matter through and force my imagination around the wonder of someone so far away and unknowable; because when I sang I did not think, something else took over, and buoyed up by all the other voices around me I would feel my body filling like a balloon, feel as if I had only to reach down deep enough inside myself to some magic centre and I would suddenly ride the air like a bird. But today I could not find that magic feeling, too conscious of my grandfather walking stiffly beside me, his own lips sealed in stony silence.

The procession had branched off via San Giuseppe onto Giovanni Battista, the poorer section of town, where Fabrizio lived. The street here was not paved, and the dirt, dry and powdery after almost a month without rain, was soaking up the drizzle and turning to a thick, imprinted paste under the marchers' feet. The houses in this part of the village were built of the same thick stone as in the rest of Valle del Sole, but were smaller and more ramshackle, paint on door frames peeling, the wood underneath crumbled and rotting, windows covered sometimes only with yellowed oil-paper. Some of the houses were deserted, the shutters nailed shut and the front doorway boarded up. Their owners had

left the country: Ercolino Mastronardi, who had gone to Argentina with his family two years before; Domenico Catalone, gone to America just after the war, and whose wife and family had joined him only recently, after an aging parent had died. The poorer families were not more likely to emigrate than those better off--it took them many years sometimes before they could scrape together enough money for the passage--but somehow the desertion on via Giovanni Battista was more noticeable than elsewhere: the abandoned houses, in poor shape to begin with, had already begun to crumble under the elements, weeds growing up from split rocks in the walls, roofs caved in from rot and termites.

I seldom came down through this section of town, even though I was friends with Fabrizio. Fabrizio never invited me home, and the one time I had come to call on him his mother, a frail-looking woman with gaunt cheeks and a slight limp, had eyed me with suspicion and discomfort and made me wait outside. From the door, though, I had got a glimpse inside. It was a single storey house, like many of the houses on this street, its tiled roof slanting in a single slope from back to front, and inside I could see the house consisted of only a single room, with an old, soiled curtain down the centre that separated it in half. The half I could see looked like the kitchen and living area--there was a rickety wooden table, a few chairs, a fireplace that looked more like just a hollow in the wall. The only light came from a small window in the back wall. The floor was of plain hardened dirt, and the house was steeped in a strong odour of sweat and urine and smoke. At night, Fabrizio told me afterwards, without any of the self-consciousness his mother had shown, he and his family slept behind the curtain, and the

goats and sheep slept in front.

Now as we passed by Fabrizio's house I hoped that he would pop his head out the front door and come out to join me; but his family had not been at the service, and likely his father had taken them out to the fields that morning like every other morning, not wanting to have anything to do with the village's celebrations. But just as we came to the end of the street, where it sloped down in a sharp switchback to join up again with via San Giuseppe, I heard, under the drone of the singing and the hiss of the rain, the sound of my own name.

'Oh, Vittō.'

It was Fabrizio, standing in a narrow alleyway in his knickers and cap, a small gulley of rain passing between his feet and into a crude gutter at the side of the street. He motioned me over to him.

'I left the sheep out in the fields,' he said grinning, 'to come and see the procession. My father lets me look after them again. He says I'm no good at cutting wheat. He says I'm going to cut my leg off one of these days, and then he'll leave me to beg in the square in Rocca Secca.' He showed me a long black-scabbed scar across his calf where he had caught himself with his scythe.

'Won't the sheep get lost?' I said.

'*Bē*, whenever I want to go for a walk I just take them to that hole near the cemetery where people used to hide during the war. I make them jump in the hole and they can't get out. But *madonna*! when I have to get them out later. Some of them are as fat as cows.'

But now Fabrizio ducked down suddenly and then pulled me deeper into the alley with him. The last stragglers were still passing behind us on

the street, their voices echoing briefly in the narrow alley as they passed.

'Christ,' Fabrizio said, crouching in the shadows. 'That was my aunt Carmella that just went by, I think she saw me. If she tells my father I was talking to you he'll break my balls.'

Instinctively I crouched down now too, and looked behind me into the street, feeling suddenly fugitive.

'It's not because of you,' Fabrizio said, still squatting, and whispering now, because the fading of the procession's song had made our voices seem suddenly loud. 'It's because of your mother and the snake. *La malocchia.*' He twisted his face into a mock scowl, bringing two fingers up to the top of his head as horns.

I crouched silently for a moment.

'Can't we play together tonight?' I whispered finally.

'It's not safe,' Fabrizio said. 'We have to wait till school starts again. Then we'll have some laughs. My father's smoking cigarettes with filters on them now.'

He reached into his pocket.

'Here,' he said, pulling out a filtered cigarette grown damp and soft with the rain. 'Keep this for later. I have to go back to the sheep.'

By now the procession had made its way back up via San Giuseppe and was passing through the main square again and towards the outskirts of town, Father Niccolo still in front and shaking his aspergillum, mingling holy water with mud and rain, Mary still riding dry and purple-canopied above the crowd, bobbing slightly with the movement of her

bearers. A small crowd of watchers stood against the railing of Di Lucci's terrace under the awning, waving as the procession passed. The marchers had started on a new hymn:

O del cielo gran Regina
Tu sei degna d'ogni amor,
La beltade tua divina
Chi non ama non ha cuor.

Tu sei figlia, Tu sei sposa
Tu sei madre del Signor
Tu sei quella bianca rosa
Chi innamore i nostri cuor.

I took my place again next to my grandfather, who was still plodding stiff and silent over the mud-slicked cobblestones. The rain, though, had abated, and in a few minutes it stopped completely, little holes of blue beginning to appear in the canopy of grey overhead, these widening quickly under a stiff wind until a cold sun appeared and the sky's grey had been torn into a thousand drifting patches. We were approaching the edge of town; I could see above the heads of the crowd the balcony that opened onto the street from the second storey of our house. But no one was standing on it, and no one peering out from behind its windowed doors. Finally my grandfather and I were going past the stairwell that led down to the garden, past the stone bench, and I felt my heart quickening; but no one came out from the front door to wave as the procession passed, or to make a sign of the cross. I looked up at my grandfather, but he kept his eyes forward, swinging his cane with the same hard

determination.

The procession ended about half mile out of town, at the rusted iron gates that led down to the cemetery. The cemetery itself lay on a small, grassy plateau at the bottom of a steeply-sloping dirt path; it was here that the generations of Valle del Sole had been laid to rest, buried beneath small stone markers laid flat into the earth and worn down by wind and rain. The markers, though, went back only sixty years or so: it was the practise, despite superstitions, to bury the newly dead in old grave sites. The cemetery's ground had built up like a palimpsest, the past continually layered over by new markers, new inscriptions, and surviving only in the anonymous bones that workers unearthed when digging a new grave.

At the gates to the cemetery, before the path sloped downwards, stood a small, ancient chapel, whose tiled roof and stone walls were covered with moss and creeping vines. Memorials were sometimes held there, if relatives requested them, on the anniversaries of deaths; but from the *Festa della Madonna* until Easter the following year the chapel also served as the Virgin's home in exile. Inside, it was unadorned, to avoid providing temptation for thieves; the only spots of colour came from the small, circular window of stained glass placed at the peak of the back wall and from the mottled greens and browns of the slab of serpentine marble which formed the chapel's tiny altar. On the Feast of the Madonna, Mary was set in a fireplace-shaped niche in the chapel's back wall, from where she had a clear view of the valley through the fans of clear glass in the upper half of the chapel door. There, evidence of her own bounty resting in her lap, she presided over

the rebirth of the fields in spring.

I had left my grandfather's side now and wormed my way up to the chapel doorway to watch the men setting the Madonna in her grotto. The baldacchino had been collapsed and two of the committee members, Filippo D'Annunzio and Michele Danello, had lifted the statue off its rack and were squeezing it now through the narrow chapel door; Michele almost lost his grip as he stumbled over the chapel's threshold, and a small gasp came up from the watching crowd, replaced in a moment by chuckles of relief as Michele regained his balance. Father Niccolo was standing by officiously inside the chapel, in control again after his abasement before the Monsignor, his hands clasped before him around his now stilled aspergillum.

'*Piano, piano*,' he said, as the men set the statue down and tried to push it deeper into its niche. 'The material is very fragile. Perhaps some day we will have a real Madonna, made of marble.' He smiled at his little joke.

'With all due respect,' Michele Danello said, grinning broadly and giving the base of the statue a final shove, 'this one is very real too, Father, at least my shoulders tell me so. If you get a marble one you'll have to leave it here the whole year, because no one will be able to carry it.'

'If you get a marble one,' someone beside me said, picking up the joke, 'you'll have to make sure she isn't pregnant yet, to cut down on the weight.'

'Or she'll have to leave the baby at home,' a woman said, laughing, 'the way we all do when we go to the festival.'

But now an ear-splitting explosion cut in on the jesting, echoing through the valley in resonant waves that seemed to make the air itself tremble and quake. All eyes turned skywards, where a wisp of white smoke was lingering against the sky's now almost solid blue. In a moment another small burst of white appeared, blossoming in the air like a flower, and a split second later its accompanying bang, as loud as the first, the air over the valley vibrating again with the echo of it. A few more explosions followed at short intervals, and then finally a long series of flowering white bursts and ear-piercing blasts in quick succession, again, again, and again, no lapse between them for the ear to recover, echoes accumulating one on top of the other until the air rang with them. These were the first of the fireworks, testaments to the power of pure sound, and crying to all the valley, awake! awake! for tonight there will be feasting and song in Valle del Sole.

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XX--VOLA VOLA

It was approaching nightfall by the time my grandfather and I returned home, the sun setting orange and cold behind Castilucci while I trembled in my damp suit from the chill. Our kitchen, though, was warm--my mother was sitting in front of a small fire, her body slouched forward to take in the heat. The table had been set with two plates, a platter in the centre holding some bread and a few thick slabs of provolone, a decanter of wine and a glass at my grandfather's place.

'You couldn't have made some soup?' my grandfather said when he saw the table. But my mother did not turn away from the fire.

'It's all right to waste firewood to keep your feet warm, but not to feed your family.'

My grandfather and I both went to our rooms to change out of our damp clothes before we sat down to supper. Then we ate in silence, my mother keeping her place by the fire. My grandfather seldom drank more than a half of glass of wine with his meal but tonight he was downing it in quick gulps. I chewed down on my food but it seemed to be sticking in my throat, the bread too hard and dry, the cheese too salty. Finally I climbed off my chair and went over to where my mother was sitting.

'Mamma,' I said, almost in a whisper, 'aren't you coming to listen to the music tonight?'

'I'm not feeling very well,' my mother said, putting an arm around my waist. 'I think I'll just go to bed.'

'*Fessa!*' my grandfather said suddenly, his face flushing. 'You might as well make an announcement!'

A pause.

'Like you did last night?' my mother said finally.

'What I did is my own business.'

'And what I do,' my mother said softly, staring into the fire as if she were sharing a secret with it, 'is my business.'

'Not while you're living in this house, *porca madonna*! Not while you want to remain my daughter!'

With that my grandfather struggled up from his chair and closed himself in his room, leaving an unfinished chunk of bread and cheese in his plate. After a minute my mother stood up and and cleared the table, throwing my grandfather's unfinished food into the fireplace, then went upstairs. I took her seat by the fire, watching the bits of bread and cheese my mother had thrown there be slowly swallowed up by flames. The bread burned easily, drying quickly to a dark brown and then bursting into a ball of flame; but the cheese sizzled richly for a moment and oozed oil, melting down around the coals before it, too, caught fire. We did not eat provolone every day, and I had never seen my mother throw it into the fire before; even the bread might have been saved for breakfast, or at least been given to the pigs.

I sat in front of the fire for a long time, watching it dwindle, prodding it once in a while with a poker to burn the last of the wood. Finally my grandfather came shuffling out of his room, wearing a heavy sweater of dark wool.

'Put on your jacket,' he said gruffly, moving towards the door. 'It'll be cold.' But as I got up to comply my mother came down the stairs with my jacket in her hands and a thick shawl around her

shoulders. My grandfather, already at the door, looked up at her, but said nothing. He led the way now as the three of us stepped out the door and into the darkening street, and melted into the file of other villagers and visitors making their way to the square. The street was lined with cars and carts that had squeezed up along the gutter, mules and donkeys tied to the fenders of cars or to metal rings embedded in the stone fronts of houses and munching on feed bags or snorting and braying in the chill.

The square was alive with people already, small crowds of men and women gathered around lanterns and laughing and joking, children racing in and out of shadows or tugging on their mothers' skirts in shyness or boredom. Many of the chairs that had been set out in the square were already filled, the front ones mainly by older women, who had arrived early to have a good view of the dance area: by the end of the evening they would have a thorough record of who had danced with who, and would be able to predict with reasonable accuracy the marriages of the coming season. There was a bustle of activity around Di Lucci's terrace, a steady flow of people moving in and out through the door with beer or glasses of wine in hand, dark-haired young men leaning against the railing and joking with demure young women, a crowd gathered around a table where a game of cards was in progress.

To the side of the terrace, wedged between a corner of the bandstand and Di Lucci's building, was a large bus that had somehow managed to squeeze its way up via San Giuseppe to its present resting place. Above the bus's back door, in large black capitals, were the words `Capo di Molise,' then underneath, in smaller capitals frilled with loops and

swirls, *'Gruppo Folcloristico.'* This was the band that would be playing tonight, and its presence here was a major coup for la comitata, made possible by money from America: it was said that the band was known all over Italy, and that its songs could often be heard playing on the radio. It had come up all the way from Campobasso, a trip that would have taken the better part of the day, since the only route from there to Valle del Sole involved a long detour through Boiano and Isernia, along rough, winding roads seldom used by anything larger than a mule cart.

The band's equipment had already been arranged on the stage, guarded there by vigilant members of the comitata who steered away unruly children trying to scramble up on the stage for a better look and answered the questions of curious onlookers with an air of indifferent authority. The equipment, gleaming dully under the light of a few lanterns, looked strange and surreal, like something just descended from the sky: silver drums and blood red accordions, a waist-high brown chest with alternating black and white strips running along its upper surface, an odd, thin guitar with no hole in the centre, tall black boxes with cloth faces, long silver poles with heavy round bases and small fists of metal at their tops. But what was stranger: wires, wires everywhere, leading away from the instruments and the black boxes and the silver poles, connecting up to larger black cables which snaked down the side of the stage and onto the ground to slither finally through a little gap cut into the back door of the band's bus. And now I noticed the string of white and orange balls that were suspended from post to post around the bandstand, and two other strings that went from one corner of the

bandstand to Di. Lucci's terrace, and from the opposite corner to the eaves of a house across the square. I thought at first the balls were tiny balloons, added as extra decoration to the streamers and banners and pennants stretched around the bandstand and over the square, but I saw now that they were light bulbs, hundreds of small lights hanging inertly in the chill evening air, their wires leading back to the same thick cables that disappeared into the bus's interior.

The nearest source of electricity to Valle del Sole was Rocca Secca. That was where the line that came from Isernia, and before that from Rome, perhaps, or Naples, ended. For several years now the people of Valle del Sole had anxiously been awaiting the arrival of *la luce*, light, and one of my grandfather's functions as mayor had been to lobby the government representative in Rocca Secca, who like him was a Christian Democrat, to make the needs of Valle del Sole known to the government in Rome. A project had actually at one point got underway, but there had been problems: first, some activists in Castilucci, which was largely Communist, had got wind of the fact that there were no plans to carry the line as far as *their* town, because of its political affiliation, and had started engaging in sporadic acts of sabotage, cutting down poles in the night and setting fire to machinery; then the contractor, unable to get compensation from the government for the damage, and finding besides that the terrain made his work much more expensive than he had estimated, had finally absconded to Argentina with the little advance he had recieved, leaving behind a mass of unpaid debts. You could still see about a half mile of evenly spaced wireless poles stretching like dead trees from the edge of Rocca Secca down the high

road towards Valle del Sole; but that was as far as the project had got, and now it seemed no light would come to Valle del Sole for several years.

But there were those light bulbs, hundreds of them, stretched out along their wires in alternating white and orange and swaying patiently in the wind, as if some miracle was shortly to fire them; and there was all that strange brightly coloured equipment, so out of place in the drab earth colours of Valle del Sole, and spewing wires like some great tentacled beast. I could see that other people in the crowd were as baffled as I was, were going up to members of the comitata and whispering their awe and confusion, asking to be let in on the secret. But the committee members only shook their heads and grinned broadly.

'You'll see,' they said. 'Like magic. Poof!'

As we were making our way through the crowd, looking for a place to sit, I saw Fabrizio's brother Fulvio talking with a bunch of older boys and went up to him. Fulvio was about five years older than I was, and had been pulled out of school after grade one, to help his father on the farm. His body had grown tawny and muscled from years of work in the fields, and he held it like a grown-up, legs apart, weight on one foot, lips twisted into a perpetual leer. When I came up to him he was holding a cigarette between thumb and middle finger of one hand, smoking it openly, making sure that the grown-ups around him would notice.

'Is Fabrizio coming tonight?' I said, blushing with discomfort. Younger boys avoided older boys in Valle del Sole, if they did not want to be humiliated.

Fulvio looked down at me and gave a little snort.

'Fabrizio's sick,' he said. 'He's got a broken ass.' The boys around him laughed. 'Why don't you go play with your mother, she'll show you a few tricks.' The boys laughed again.

I caught up with my mother and my grandfather again, and we took a seat in the back row, me sitting between them. A few people came up and spoke to my grandfather, quietly, respectfully, but no one laughed with him or slapped him on the back, and no one made the mistake of calling him *lu podestà*--it seemed that by now even the out-of-towners had learned of the previous night's meeting. A few people rubbed their hands on my head perfunctorily and made some little joke with me; but no one spoke to my mother, and the seats beside her remained empty, though the other seats in the square were filling quickly. Even Giuseppina Danello and Maria Maiale, though they passed not five feet behind us on their way up to Di Lucci's, their voices ringing clear above those around them, walked past my mother as if she were invisible. My mother, though, seemed not to notice any of this: she sat silently with her arms folded against the cold and her eyes staring straight ahead at the bandstand, as if she too were anxiously awaiting the secret that would shortly be revealed there.

But after about ten minutes a slim, well-groomed man I didn't recognize came out of the shadows behind us and sat down beside my mother, taking off a brown fedora as he sat.

'Alfreddo!' my mother said, sounding a little surprised. 'No one told me you were back.'

Alfreddo was wearing a dark blue suit which seemed to fit better and be of finer material than the suits the villagers wore. From where I

was sitting I got a whiff of a sweet odour coming from him like flowers. I thought he might be from Rome, though when he spoke he used the dialect of Castilucci.

'I got in last night,' he said, speaking in a low tone. 'My sister is getting married next week, and I thought I would try to make it back for *la Madonnna*. Also I came to sell my property.'

'Sell your property?' my mother said, recovering now her usual calm. 'Why, to pay for that suit? You look like someone from the camorra.'

'I'm bringing my wife and family back to Canada with me,' Alfreddo said somberly, staring at his hat. 'Five years is long enough for a family to be separated.'

'Well, it doesn't look like you mind being separated from them tonight. I don't see them with you.'

But Alfreddo did not carry on the joke, and an awkward moment of silence passed.

'Cristina,' he said finally, 'I brought you something from your husband.' He reached into his breast pocket and handed my mother an envelope. She tore it open, and as she unfolded the letter inside a brown bank note fell out of the folds onto her lap. The number '100' was inscribed in each of the note's corners, and the word 'Canada' written across its face next to the bust of a pretty, short-haired young woman.

'What's this?' my mother said, picking up the brown bill.

Alfreddo shrugged.

'Something to get you through the winter.'

'But he sends me money through the bank,' my mother said. 'He probably needs it more than I do. I hear he's living in a chicken coop.'

'It's not a chicken coop,' Alfreddo said. 'It's a room attached to Umberto Di Menna's barn. He must have told you in his letters. They fixed it up so he has water and electricity.'

'He doesn't tell me anything,' my mother said, growing animated now. 'He only complains. "I hope you're not wasting the money I send you on *stupidaggine*." Then why does he send it to me, if he thinks I'll waste it? I don't need it. And then: "Make sure that Vittorio has some warm clothes for the winter." And I feel lucky he reminds me, because otherwise the poor boy would run around naked. And then: "My mother tells me you haven't been to see her. That is not the way for a wife to behave. We will talk about this when I see you." Yes, and I know his way of talking. With the back of his hand.'

Alfreddo remained silent, fingering the rim of the hat.

'And if he's so worried about me,' my mother said, flushed now with restrained anger, 'he didn't have to go to America. To live in a barn. We have some nice stables right here in Valle del Sole.'

'You're exaggerating, Cristina,' Alfreddo said finally. 'You know yourself that he wants only the best for you and Vittorio. He wants to buy a farm, so he can bring the two of you over.'

'He knows I won't leave my father,' my mother said, though a little uncertainly. I looked over at my grandfather, but he gave no sign that he was listening to the conversation. 'Anyways, I'm happy in Valle del Sole.'

Alfreddo raised his eyes briefly to look at my mother, then lowered them again.

'That's not what I heard.'

My mother now did something I had never seen her do before: she blushed deep red. For a moment she seemed at a loss for words, and when Alfreddo spoke again a slight peremptory tone had crept into his speech.

'Cristina, you know I'm the one who called your husband over to Canada, so I feel responsible for him. He was always more like a brother to me than a cousin. So it hurts me to see what he's going through. He's too proud to tell you, but he can't hold a job for more than a few months. You know how he is, he fights with his bosses and they let him go. Last month he lost his job at the factory, and maybe he won't have enough to eat this winter, but still he sends you money. Sometimes he had to borrow the money so he could send it to you. That's the man your husband is, not the one you described to me.'

'So I should be pleased because he can't get along with anyone, and because he's too proud to admit it.'

'You know that's not what I mean, Cristina. He tries his best for you, even if he doesn't know how to show it, and this is how you repay him.'

'Yes, this is how I repay him,' my mother said, crumpling the bill she still held in one hand and shoving it into Alfreddo's jacket pocket. 'Tell him I don't need his money. Or tell him what you like, I don't care.'

Alfreddo pulled the bill out of his pocket and slowly smoothed it.

'I won't be the one to tell him anything,' he said slowly. 'But it's for his sake, not for yours.'

He placed the bill back on my mother's lap, then rose and slipped through a gap between two chairs, and disappeared in the crowd.

'*Brava*,' my grandfather said when he had gone, spitting the word out with such restrained force and contempt it seemed to hang in the air like ice. '*Che stupida.*'

During this conversation, the show had begun, though the little bulbs strung around the stage and over the square still waited inert on their wires. The chairman of the comitata had made a long-winded speech and then introduced the first act: Silvio the *postino*, who apart from being one of the few civil servants in Valle del Sole also had the distinction of being the village's only poet. His father had made a small fortune in America before the first war and then sent his son to study engineering at Perugia. But in Perugia Silvio had gotten in with a bad crowd, impoverished young bohemians who could quote Dante and Petrarch and Machiavelli but who took advantage of Silvio's awe of them and of the monthly cheques his father sent him. Under the influence of these friends Silvio had taken to drink and to gambling (he always seemed to lose) and had abandoned his engineering texts in favour of the classics.

Then came a period when for four months no news of Silvio reached Valle del Sole, and cheques and letters were being returned unclaimed. His parents wrote to the university, only to find he had dropped out of his program the year before; they wrote to the authorities, and learned that he had spent a week in jail for drunk and disorderly conduct. With a heavy heart Silvio's aging father made a trip into Perugia to find his son. After several days of searches and inquiries, he found him, finally, living in a bug-infested boarding house where he washed floors and cleaned chamber pots to pay his rent. He had accumulated some large

debts from his drinking and gambling. They said that when his father found him he was huddled in rags in front of a small fire in his room, burning pages out of the *Inferno* to keep the fire going, and that when he saw his father he threw himself on the ground in tears and kissed his father's muddy boots, begging him to take him home.

Silvio now worked as the village postman, delivering mail in the morning and drinking alone in his ancestral home for the rest of the day. His parents were long dead, much of the father's small fortune having been spent on Silvio's failed education and on paying off Silvio's debts in Perugia. But now every year Silvio's recitations, the last vestige of his once lofty aspirations, were always the opening act on the Saturday night of la Festa. It was hard to say what complex emotions, on the part of the villagers, went into this indulgence, for though Silvio served as a memento of failed hopes, he was at the same time a comfort to those peasants who could promise their children only another generation of hard labour on the rocky farmlands around Valle del Sole. And certainly the villagers--unlike Silvio himself, who presented himself every year with the same dogged earnestness--did not take the poetry seriously: for them it was a grand parody, a carnival inversion, the yearly dismemberment of a body few of them had ever gazed on but knew hung over them as a proof of their own ignorance, the body of high culture.

Now Silvio stood centre stage under the light of a few lamps, in a checkered suit that fit a little too tightly over his plumpish body. His jacket hung open and one of the buttons on his flowered shirt was missing, so you could see a patch of his pink, hairless belly. His

collar, adorned with a small black bow tie, was buttoned tight, and it seemed as if his head had been squeezed out of it like a balloon. A network of broken vessels on his rounded cheeks showed the effects of too much wine. Only his eyes broke the comic effect, dark pools that seemed always on the verge of tears.

'*Signor' e signori*,' he started, 'it is a great honour to be asked again to share my little poems with the people of our respected village and the many visitors who have come from Rome and Naples and--'

'Bravo, Silvio!' someone shouted, and a wave of laughter passed through the crowd.

'Never mind the speech,' someone else shouted. 'Give us a poem!' And other people took up the call, 'Oh, Silvo,' a poem! A poem from the gods!'

Every year it was the same thing. Silvio never got more than a few lines into his introduction before he was shouted down, though he always took this as a compliment, his face now red and beaming, his balloon head seeming ready to burst. So Silvio began his reciting, by heart, mingling melodramatic sonnets about jilted lovers with ballads about Garibaldi and famous bandits and lyrics about harvests and sunny days and the sea. When Silvio recited he would turn his eyes skywards to gaze at the stars, and with that gesture all his shyness seemed to vanish, his voice booming out rich and rhythmic over the crowd and his fist coming up often to strike his breast or to pound the air with emphasis. And at the end of each poem the crowd applauded and cheered, goading Silvio on to even greater animation. There was a bit of discomfort when, in the middle of reciting a poem he had learned from his father,

Silvio stumbled and fell silent, fiddled with his buttons, turned beet red, admitted finally that he had forgotten the lines; but after a moment of silence the audience burst into laughter and Silvio grinned sheepishly, then went on to counter with one of his more humourous poems:

Once upon a time in Valle del Sole
There was a big black man with two arms of gold.
With two balls of steel three feet around
And a bird so long it dragged on the ground
Now all of the women in this little town
Wanted to be his very own
But he wasn't interested, and this is why
He couldn't find a woman deep enough to try
Finally, because he was starting to rave
He left the town and he married a cave.

This was the kind of thing that went over very well in Valle del Sole, especially when delivered by Silvio, who presented even his excursions into the bawdy so earnestly that the audience could take an extra pleasure in the contrast between his words and his high-minded delivery. They cheered and laughed and applauded, Silvio taking the attention graciously, with a modest bow. But now, winding up his act, Silvio moved from the profane to the sacred.

'My last poem--' he started, only to be interrupted, as he always was, by calls of 'more! more!', cries which of course he took quite seriously, grinning and blushing and shaking his head.

'No, no, this must be the last one, I know that all the young women

are wai ti ng to dance wi th the young men, and poetry i s good for the soul, but the body, too, needs exercise.'

'Bravo Silvio! A poem for the young ladies!'

'No, the last poem must be for one special lady, in whose honour we have all gathered here tonight. She is called *la Madonna*.'

And now Silvio turned his eyes skywards, brought a hand to his breast, and began:

My Lady, we think of you
In the times of pregnant fields
With the olives falling like tears from paradise
With the grapes hanging heavy as milky breasts
While the sun rises large and red on your fruitfulness
My Lady, we think of you.

My Lady, we think of you
In the times of barren fields
With the trees deserted like loveless women
With the wine cellars dry as haggard breasts
While the sun sinks cold and yellow behind the mountains
My Lady, we think of you.

My Lady, we come like lovers
Offering kisses and warm caresses
You bless us in autumn, you comfort us in winter
My Lady, we think of you.

But when Silvio finished this poem, murmurs of discomfort arose from the

crowd, followed only by a round of fitful, confused applause. One cat-call came up from near where I was sitting, but it was quickly stifled by a scolding mother. Around me I heard mutters about 'haggard breasts' and 'warm caresses'--it seemed Silvio had unwittingly crossed some magic line between devotion and sacrilege, and even the unschooled villagers of Valle del Sole, who earlier in the day had sung their own paeans to Mary's heavenly body without shame or discomfort, knew through some instinct exactly where that magic line lay. Silvio, now, confused by the audience's response, made a gesture of helplessness and pleading with his hands, opened his mouth as if about to speak, then bowed quickly and hurried off the stage.

'What a fool he is,' my mother said, to no one in particular, 'expecting these people to appreciate poetry. All they know are sheep and goats.'

'Since when did you become an expert on poetry,' my grandfather said.

The chairman had come back up on stage and induced a last round of applause for Silvio; now he was giving a rambling introduction to 'Capo di Molise,' *gruppo folcloristico*. That label, 'folklore group,' was one that had only recently become common in the region. But though in the cities the word '*folcloristico*' might have conjured up images of the rustic life of peasants, for the peasants it meant 'modern,' because it was something from the city, and because their own music was simply music--there was no other type of music in their everyday experience that they might oppose it to, and so the idea that their songs were part of some old, half-forgotten thing called 'folklore' would not have made

sense to them. There were no radios in Valle del Sole to keep people informed of the latest trends in modern music, and even at the festivals it was usually local groups that played--not 'folklore' groups that made recordings and had their songs played across the country, like 'Capo di Molise,' but a motley assortment of singers from local families, fat and thin, young and old, brought into the group by family tradition, and dressed sometimes in traditional (meaning 'new') outfits, if they could afford to have the tailor make one up, and sometimes not. These singers would arrange themselves in a semi-circle on the stage, as if posing for a wedding photograph, and a sole accordion player would stand in the middle of them drawing and heaving, carrying the tune with his solitary notes.

But 'Capo di Molise' had come all the way from Campobasso, and in a bus, laden down with the strange equipment that now sat expectant on the stage, waiting to be brought to life, gear that had nothing to do with the lives of the peasants. And if some miracle was shortly to happen on stage it would not be a peasant's miracle, a miracle of loaves and fishes, or of a poor sinnner raised from the dead; no, this would to be a miracle of the city, where God had been replaced by electric lights and radios and motor cars, and where night and day, His primal division, flowed into each other without distinction. Up on stage the chairman was preparing the way for this revelation, his own face flushed with restrained excitement.

'*Per favore*,' he said, 'the band has asked that we put out all the lamps before they come on stage. Please, it's important that we follow instructions, in a moment you'll see why, yes every lamp, at the

back too, that's it, *grazie*, one more in the corner there, that's it.' And one by one, hesitantly at first, but then more surely under the chairman's prodding, the lamps went out, and the darkness slowly swallowed us. Finally just the two lamps on stage remained, and the chairman, murmuring his approval and rubbing his hands together in expectation, blew these out too, the darkness broken now only by the light of stars and of a pale crescent moon.

The audience sat for a moment in utter silence. Up on stage a few forms moved through the darkness and set themselves up behind the instruments there, but then silence descended again. A long minute passed. Then, from the direction of the band's bus, we heard a sound like the cough of an engine starting. It was coming from inside the bus, the sound spilling out through the now open back door, once, twice, three times an engine rolling over heavily and then falling again into silence. Then, on the fourth try, the engine caught, sputtering a bit as it tried to gather momentum but settling finally into a dull, even roar that filled the night. For a moment nothing more happened, and people began to whisper and murmur again, fidgeting in their seats, wondering aloud whether it would be all right to light the lamps again; but then everything happened very quickly. The back door of the bus slammed shut, cutting the engine's noise down to a high hum; then the engine dropped suddenly into a low groan, as if a great load had just been placed on it, and from the stage a steadily swelling drum roll tumbled through the darkness; and finally a great collective gasp came up from the audience as the darkness fled and the square filled suddenly with light, a thousand tiny bulbs glowing bright white and amber above

us, blotting out the moon, the stars, people squinting from the strength of them, shielding their eyes as if staring at the sun. But there was hardly time to recover from this shock before the next one came, emerging this time from the big black boxes set up on the stage: a sudden burst of sound, as loud as the bombs that had cracked the air over the valley earlier in the day, rolling out over us like thunder as the band members started in on a vigorous overture. As they played through the opening bars, the audience still frozen by the shock of light and sound, a chorus began to dance single file from the shadows of the band's bus up into the halo of lights around the stage, first three women and three girls, who arranged themselves in two files behind a silver pole on the left side of the stage, then three men and three boys, who arranged themselves on the right, in perfect symmetry, all of them dressed in bright costumes of green, white, and black, with sashes of red and gold. Then, while the members of the chorus kept up a synchronized marching movement to the time of the music, two more people came up on stage, a young man and woman, dressed more richly than the rest, wide sleeves studded with silver sequins, wrists adorned with golden bangles, the woman's hair flowing long and dark behind her, the man's short and slicked back, groomed to a black sheen. They sashayed hand in hand up to centre stage and took a small bow, and then, smiling graciously, the man spoke into the fist of metal perched on the silver pole in front of him, his voice rolling out loud and rich over the sound of the music.

'*Buona sera, signor' e signori.* We are "Capo di Molise".'

Only now did the trance which the audience had fallen into break, and suddenly everyone was cheering and clapping, men throwing their caps

up into the air and slapping each other on the back, women shaking their heads in disbelief and then bursting into laughter at the wonder of it, young children standing up on their chairs to add their own shrieks and shouts to the uproar. The miracle had come, brought about by something so simple as a little engine in the band's bus: what the government had not been able to do in years of wrangling and false starts 'Capo di Molise' had done now with a little flick of a switch, transforming Valle del Sole's medieval square, which had never known anything more than the dim light of a few lanterns and the lonely notes of a sole accordion, into a pocket of rich modernity, as bright and alive as any street in Rome or Naples.

'Oh, yes,' said a young man behind me, shouting to be heard over the sound of the music, 'they're called *genesistatori*, I saw one of them once when I was in the army.'

'*Ma che, genesistatori*,' said another. '*Sono generistatori*, in Rome everyone has one of them in their kitchens, that's how they get their hot water.'

But despite these acts of naming, the brute fact of sound and light remained, and the audience swarmed towards the stage like pilgrims to a shrine, leaving only old women in black and old men with canes, too skeptical and stolid to put much faith in such apparitions, to keep their seats warm.

As for me, perched on the back of my seat now for a better view, I could only stare in wonder with the rest, feeling as if I had just been transported into one of la maestra's stories of the saints, the world suddenly filled with cleansing light, all possibilities open again.

But when I looked down from my perch at my mother and grandfather, wanting to share my excitement with them, they were still sitting as unmoved as sentries on either side of me, my mother's arms folded tight across her breasts, my grandfather leaning forward on his cane, his face grim and hard. All the seats around us had been emptied by now, and even the young men who had been standing behind us had moved up closer to the stage, to get a better view or to squeeze into the already crowded dance area with one of the village's young women. I felt my excitement draining away from me: nothing, after all, had changed, the light and sound had been gifts only for the rest of the crowd, had done nothing to dispel the darkness and silence that lingered like a noxious cloud around the three of us.

'Stupid peasants,' my mother said finally, barely audible above the sound of the music. 'As if they've never seen a light bulb before.'

Up on stage the first song was already well underway. The lead singers had picked up the tune of the overture and embarked on a singing duel, battling lovers reprimanding each other in song for supposed indiscretions, the twelve members of the chorus picking up the refrain:

(Male): *Secondo me ti sbagli, sei esagerata*
Perche colla farmacista i' c'ho cenato.

(Chorus): *Quant' è bello lu prim' amor*
Lu second' è piu bel ancora.

(Female): I think you do me wrong if you lose your head
Because you found a soldier hiding under my bed.

(Chorus): Your first romance is wonderful
Your second one is better still.

The words were in familiar Molisano dialect; the song, though, was not a local one but a fairly recent hit, as the lead singer announced afterwards, by a famous singer from the Campobasso area. But by now many of the younger people in the audience had picked up the refrain and were singing along, *con brio*, and the dancers in the dance area were clapping out the rhythm in between twirls and dips. Some of the older people had begun to filter back to their chairs, shaking their heads, as if sad they could not compete with the energy of youth; but back where I was sitting neither youth nor age gave any signs of having been infected by the evening's gaiety; both mother and grandfather still sat sullen on either side of me, as if sitting out a vigil, eyes staring blankly into space.

The band played on. Many of the songs were unfamiliar, and even the few old favourites they played, like '*Vino Vino*' and '*Lu Ciuciarillo di Zi' Niccolo*,' were rendered strange and new by the twang and blare of the band's electrical equipment. In between songs the lead singers, who introduced themselves as Mario and Maria, joked with the audience and with each other, making themselves at home.

Mario: Tell me, Maria, honestly, how many times have you been unfaithful to me?

Maria (laughing): Look up at the sky. How many stars do you see?

Mario (gasping): That many? But you know, Maria, you must careful. A wronged man can turn into a devil.

Maria: Not everything with horns is a devil. Goats have horns too.

But though the bantering of the singers and the energy of the music seemed to keep the audience at a constant high charge through the first set, the glare of the lights and the blare of the music had soon set my head throbbing, and I was grateful when the band set down its instruments for a break, its wall of sound giving way to the cloistered hum of the engine inside the bus and to the human drone of the crowd. I climbed down from the back of my chair into my seat. My buttocks were sore from the seat back pushing into them, and my fingers and toes felt numb from cold.

'Why don't you go look for Fabrizio,' my mother said. But I sat without responding.

A few minutes into the intermission, Di Lucci came up and squatted in the aisle beside my grandfather, pulling up his trouser legs as he lowered himself awkwardly onto his haunches, big gourd belly coming to rest against his crotch. My grandfather grunted in greeting.

'*Crist' e Mari*'!' Di Lucci said. 'Have you ever seen a festival like this? The lights! I knew about it all, of course, since they wanted to hang them from my terrace, so I thought it was only right that I should know, but still I was just as surprised as everyone else, you know, when it happened. Like a miracle! And the people! I've never seen a crowd like this before, they'll be talking about us all the way to Rome and Naples. I've got my wife and both my sons working behind the bar, and still we can't keep up.'

'Then maybe you should go in and give them a hand,' my mother said. 'You can work off a few pounds of fat.'

'Ha, ha, ha,' Di Lucci laughed, all smiles. 'So I see that Alfreddo

Pannunzio came back for the festival. I saw you talking to him before, maybe he had some news from your husband, no?'

'He told me he's living in a stable.'

'Ha, ha, in a stable, well, he's probably trying to save some money, so he can bring you over. Maybe you'll be going soon, eh? Just old men like you and me,' speaking to my grandfather now, 'that's all there'll be left in Valle del Sole.'

'Then maybe we can die in peace,' my grandfather said.

Di Lucci shook his head thoughtfully, as if pondering the passing of the Golden Age, then stood up and clapped his hand on my grandfather's shoulder.

'Well, back to work. For you a festival means enjoyment. For me it means work.'

'What a jackass,' my mother said, as soon as Di Lucci was out of hearing range.

The band's second set started out on the same high pitch as the first, but as the evening wore on the tempo seemed gradually to decrease and the mood to mellow, the band's lively modern songs giving way more and more to local ones, the ones that all of us knew from past festivals or from holiday nights huddled around a fire, when the men, their hearts warmed by wine, would suddenly break into song. Now the accordion began to take centre stage, with melancholy notes that seemed all in a minor key and that rode out over the sound of the other instruments to hang on the night wind like the threat of a frost, or a death. Sitting again on the back of my chair, I followed the accordion sounds up into the high reaches of sadness, saw sadness stretched before me like a barren land-

scape, winter fields patched with snow, dead trees, ruined harvests, crags of mountain bearing long deserted nests. From there it was only a little ways more to sleep, my senses winding down as I rode towards darkness and silence and left behind the square with all its glitter and sound, moving towards the silent twinkle of a few wind-torn stars, on the shaft of a final mélancholy note.

But now a hand reached out to pull me back into the light and noise of the square, and I opened my eyes to see my mother standing over me. The band, I heard, was announcing the last song of the evening.

'Come on, Vittorio,' my mother said, 'we're going to dance.'

She took me by the hand and led me into the aisle. People in their seats stared up at her as we walked past; other couples moving towards the dance area stepped aside for a moment as if making way for us. The band had begun playing 'Vola Vola,' a very popular song in the region, a song of wooing and innocence. The singers had arranged themselves in the familiar semi-circle, and the musicians had abandoned their instruments to come join them, leaving only the accordion player to pick out the night's final melody. Maria and Mario still stood centre stage, singing alternately, though now they were no longer the duelling lovers of the evening's first song but the happy couple remembering their days of courtship.

Mario: *Vorrei far ritornare un ora sola*
Il tempo bello della contentezza

Maria: *Quando che noi giocando a vola vola*
di baci io ti coprivo e di carezze.

Chorus: *Ehhhhhhhhhhhhhh--vola vola vola vola*

E vola lu pavone

Il cuore tuo e buono

E fammi lo provar.

Ehhhhhhhhhhhhhh--vola vola vola vola

E vola lu pavone

Il cuore tuo e buono

E fammi lo provar.

The dance area, hemmed in by women who had moved their chairs all around the perimeter to have a better view, was packed tight, but my mother found a little area where for a while we had enough space to shuffle and swirl. We kept a little distance between each other as my mother moved me around in a small circle, my hand resting against the cool silk of her blouse; but other couples were coming up now from their seats and crowding around us, bumping into me and pushing me into my mother's groin. We were being jostled closer and closer to the centre of the dance area, deep into the crush of bodies around us. From my level I could see only the shuffling of legs and torsos, a faceless shifting of flesh, the air suddenly hot and oppressive, tinged with the smell of sweat. Voices boomed out from the black boxes on stage, and now the crowd had taken up the chorus:

Ehhhhhhhhhhhh--vola vola vola

Il gallinacio

Poi se me guard' in faccia

Mi pare di sognar.

Now, in mid-song, the musicians were taking their leave, bowing to applause and cheers as the song played on, and then two by two, male and

female, the members of the chorus began also to sashay off the stage. In the dance area the dancers were still grinding around my mother and me, churning like wheels and gears; by now we had gotten right to the centre, locked in on all sides by a human wall. Maria and Mario bowed out, finally, leaving only the accordion player on stage, but the crowd was still dancing and singing. My mother and I kept twirling at the centre, faster and faster, until finally it seemed the crowd around us was fading back, melting away, as a thousand voices started in on the final refrain:

Like flowers are born under spring's rays
Love first blossoms in childhood's beams
Tell me you love me yesterday
Don't take away my hopes and dreams.

Ohh, fly, little goldfinch, fly
And carry our love to where love never dies
To a place where suns never set when they rise
Oh, fly, little goldfinch, fly.

When the song ended, it was only my mother's face I could see, lit up by laughter like a star. Then, the last note of the accordion still hovering on the wind, the small lights which had graced our little festival went black, night falling thick and sudden on the square. A moment later came the sound of a long whistle followed by a small explosion, and my mother and I looked up to see the sky over the valley filled with coloured lights, a burst of small, fading speckles of green, white, and red. It was midnight, and the final fireworks had begun, all heads

turning now to the evening's last spectacle. The Madonna, too, cloistered in her little chapel, would be watching.

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XXI--3 OCTOBER 1956

when we eat they jus say pass the meat and give me the bread like the way people talked at my granpa Vittorios funeral so it make me afraid to talk or even say anything. My mother did something wrong which even other people wont talk to her but it wasnt her fault it was the snake. which makes me want to hate snakes and the nex time i see one I dont care what color it is i am going to pick up a big stick and Kill it. Because if it bites you people wont talk to you any more even your father or your grandfather and that isnt right. fabrizio dind come to school today or even since school start on monday because i think is Father is making him work like a donkey or something or doesnt even want him to see me. when I saw fabrizio las week that was before school start i was watching the sheep hear the cematary and fabrizio call out to me from hiding behind the chapel and he said come over here so no one can see us and i did. he said remember the festival cause i dind see him since then and I said i remember and he said when he get home that night his father pull down his pants and hit him until his bum started to bleeding. and then he lock him in the house with the goats so he cound come to the dance he said he could hear the music and then the fireworks but he cound see them. his mother tole him to stay away from
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me cause i was Bad Luck and i t was only for that is father was hitting him. but fabrizio said it was because my mother did someting with a man she wasnt supposed to like the goats to make babies and i pick up a stone and throw it at fabrizios head and start hitting him and then we were fighting and i start crying saying stupid he dind know it was jus the snake and he was stupid like his stupid father and i hope his father hit him til he dies and then fabrizio stop fighting with me and he said stop crying he said it was only the snake your right your right it was only the snake.

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XXII--AN EYE FOR AN EYE

I had not had much to do with the village boys during the summer, but when school started it quickly became clear what my status was now among them. For the first few days I was merely shunned, and could not make out the insults which boys and sometimes girls whispered to each other in class while they smirked at me from their desks; but by the end of the first week I had had my first fight. It happened so quickly, and in such a haze of confused emotions, that the details are very unclear to me now. It was Vincenzo Maiale, Maria's son, who provoked me, as we were coming out of classes on our way home, with some veiled comment about my mother which I don't think I even really understood but which touched off suddenly a fire of rage and frustration. Before I could think I had flung myself on him kicking and flailing and scratching, a
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small volley of pure anger, my blood grown thick and hot. But in the midst of the attack, my body committed now to violence and seeming to know instinctively, if I would only let it run its course, what centres to strike, the gross art of inflicting pain, a sinking feeling came over me and suddenly all my rage of a moment before simmered to a vague terror and regret, not the terror of being beaten in a fight but something else, terror of my own outburst, of the strange thing which was not me that had just flung itself with such dangerous force on Vincenzo Maiale.

Vincenzo was about two years older than me, and a good deal taller and stronger, and it did not take more than a split second for his own body to sense the sudden lag in my resolution and to move from surprised defense to attack; in a moment he had me pinned to the ground and was beating my head against the earth with his fists, while the other children stood round watching and cheering him on. I was struggling now to get free but Vincenzo was kneeling on my arms, his kneecaps grinding into my bones. Another wave of violence took hold of me like a possession, and I flailed my legs around vainly, then let out a long stream of abuse, shouting out every last bit of air in my lungs, filling the air with curses that had never crossed my lips before. But Vincenzo only laughed, then rose up magnanimously to show what an easy victory it had been and began walking away, his friends gathering around him to congratulate him.

My head was spinning from the force of Vincenzo's blows, and I felt the warmth of blood trickling from my nose down the side of my face. As I scrambled up from the ground someone shouted, '*La maestra!*,' and now the children that were still gathered around me scattered, and the

laughter of Vincenzo and his friends ceased abruptly as they disappeared down the church steps. In a moment she was upon me, her large breasts trembling in consternation. She had heard my cursing, I thought in horror, and now all the world would know the evil I was capable of.

But the teacher only pursed her lips and shook her head, then took a handkerchief out of a pocket in her skirt and wiped at the blood under my nose and along my cheek.

'Look at you,' she said. And in obedience I looked down at myself, to see that my pants were caked with dirt and my shirt was ripped where Vincenzo had pulled at it. 'It's that woman's fault, all of this, she thinks she's as free as a bird, to do as she pleases. Who did you fight with?'

But I stared at the ground, saying nothing.

'Well, you're probably right not to tell me,' she said finally, 'it'll only make things worse for you. Go home now—and show your mother what she did to you. Here, hold your head out and your hand under it to catch the blood, and when you get home tell your mother to put a little bit of garlic in it and then lie down with your head hanging over the side of the bed. Make sure you drink at least three glasses of water before you go to sleep. Look, even your lip is bleeding, in the morning it'll be as big as a melon.'

It was only when I had begun my descent down the church steps and la maestra was out of hearing that I allowed myself finally to begin whimpering, my anguish fueled suddenly by the sight of blood dripping from my nose into my cupped palm. The whimper grew to a low drone as I reached the bottom of the steps and started down the street, and remained con-

stant there while I walked past women knitting on their stoops and classmates waiting in alleys to see what had become of me; but as I neared the end of the street and approached my house I broke finally into full-fledged sobs, the sobs growing to a continuous wail by the time I opened the door to the kitchen, and stepped inside.

My mother was standing over the table kneading dough.

'*Per l'amore di Cristo*! Oh, *dio*, look at you! Who did this to you?'

She had come over to me already and was wiping at the blood under my nose with her apron, my wailing simmering down to sobs again under her ministrations; now she quickly went to the cupboard and poured some water into a basin, and came back to wipe the dried blood from my face and daub my swelling lip. She dipped my blood-filled palm into the basin to wash it, the water turning a thin crimson as the blood dispersed through it.

'Who did this to you, Vittorio, tell me. *Dio, dio, che figura*!'

I was down to sniffles again now, heartened by my mother's anger and concern, feeling safe again under her protective wing.

'It was Vincenzo,' I blurted out, the words catching in my throat, spurring me on to renew my sobbing.

'Vincenzo? Maria's son?'

I nodded.

'*Quella cagna! Quella strega!* She's the one who put him up to this,' still daubing, wiping the wet cloth across my forehead, my cheeks, brushing at my torn and dirtied clothes, tucking my shirt back into my pants. My nose, by now, entirely of its own accord, had stopped

dripping. My mother, interrupting her attentions for a moment to stare down and me, suddenly took me in her arms and hugged me tightly, rocking me back and forth against her.

'Oh, Vittorio, you'll see, I'll make her pay for this, by the blood of Christ I'll make her pay,' and then, wiping at some tears which had formed in her own eyes, she took me suddenly by the hand and marched me out the door and into the street. Up via San Giuseppe at a quick pace, hand in hand, my classmates by now all gone off to their games or their chores but the knitting women still holding their places, staring after us as we marched, until finally, just before the square, we came to Maria's doorway, where my mother pounded on the door with both fists, her hair whipping back and forth with her movement.

'Open this door, Maria, or I swear I'll break it down if I have to!'

By now the knitting women had left their stoops and were creeping up cautiously towards the scene of the action, whispering among themselves, staring at my mother with looks of wonder and alarm.

'Open the door!'

Finally the door opened, Maria's large purple-veined body looming in the doorway; but she had time only to say a surprised 'Cristina!' before my mother lunged at her with arms outstretched, hands aimed for the throat. Behind me the knitting women gasped as Maria, open-mouthed with shock, stumbled backwards and fell with a cry to the stone floor of her kitchen. In a moment my mother was on top of her, straddling her mountainous hips, Maria struggling wildly to keep my mother's hands from closing around her throat, writhing on the floor like a great beached fish and clawing at my mother's wrists.

'*Cristo' e Maria*,' someone behind me said, 'she's going to kill her!'

Now Maria was kicking up her legs, trying unsuccessfully to get them up around my mother's head, her skirt hiking up to give a clear view of her thick thighs and wide underwear.

'Vincenzo, *autami*!' she screamed, and it was only now that I noticed Vincenzo and his small brother and sister cowering in a dark corner of the kitchen. 'Cristina, *sei impazzita*! You've gone mad!'

My mother had worked her knees now onto Maria's elbows, leaving her forearms to claw helplessly at the air, and finally my mother's hands closed around Maria's throat. Maria grunted and gasped, her face reddening, but then with a last desperate burst of energy she pulled one of her arms free and in one quick movement reached up to grab a clump of my mother's hair and yanked sharply, pulling my mother's head towards the floor with a sudden lurch. My mother yelped and released Maria's throat to free her hair; but Maria, moving suddenly very quickly for someone of her great girth, now pulled her other arm free and shot both her fists into my mother's stomach, sending her rolling doubled up onto the floor. In the flash of an eye Maria had scrambled up from the floor and lurched through a nearby doorway, slamming the door behind her just as my mother was lunging towards her again.

'Get out of my house!' Maria shouted through the door, ramming a bolt into place. 'Get out! You've gone mad, you have some devil in you, you and all your proud talk. You see what it's come to! *Dio autami*, she wants to kill me!'

But my mother was not paying any heed to Maria's breathless shouts;

after looking wildly around the room for a moment she had flung open the door of a cupboard and now picked up a bowl. A second later the bowl shattered against the door Maria had hid behind, fragments of clay scattering across the room.

'You tell your Vincenzo,' my mother shouted, picking up another bowl and flinging it after the first, 'that if he lays another finger on my son'--a glass now joined the two bowls, its clear shards spraying out like water--'I'll tear out your eyes and feed them to the dogs. To the dogs!'

She threw one last dish against the door, and it explode with a bang and a tinkle against the rough wood. The floor now was covered with shards of glass and coloured clay, a sea of it, some of it sprayed out as far as the front stoop, where I and the knitting ladies, who had drawn in close by now, stood watching.

'Do you hear that Vincenzo?' my mother said, turning to the corner where he still stood cowering with his siblings. 'I swear I'll kill her, even if I have to rot in hell for it.'

And so saying she turned and walked out the door, taking my hand and leading me past the knitting women without so much as a word, leaving them to murmur and shake their heads in wonder behind us.

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XXIII--THE EYE OF NIGHT

My mother hadn't finished with hospitals--not long after the incident with Maria, some new demon took possession of her. As I was going down to the stable to fetch the sheep one day, I heard noises that sounded like someone choking or retching. I continued down the steps more quickly, but then stopped suddenly as I rounded the corner at the bottom of the steps: on the ground in front of the door, next to a short milking stool, sat a metal basin with about a half inch of blood in the bottom of it, the blood flashing rich red in the afternoon light. But a second later I saw the source of it: on the other side of the basin lay the limp body of a chicken, a fleshy clot around the stump of its neck; and just next to it, on a wooden block, a blood-stained cleaver and the chicken's severed head, beak agape and eyes still open.

My mother was in the stable, leaning over the low wall of the pigs' stall, her blood-stained hands clutching the stone. She did not notice me as I came up to her; she was moaning lowly, eyelids drooping with a look of tiredness. But as I watched, her body suddenly came alive, her eyes opening wide and her body wrenching forward like a whip as a stream of blue vomit, a pale, unearthly blue, spewed from her mouth and splattered onto the dirt floor of the pig's stall.

I stood frozen beside her, too frightened to speak. Our three pigs were squealing in excitement or fear, their ruddy pink flesh splattered with spots of vomit, a wide pool of viscous blue spreading across the floor of their stall. My mother had gone momentarily limp, but now she retched again, her whole body taking part in the violence of it, breasts

and stomach heaving, head wrenching sharply, strands of hair slashing forward to catch drops of vomit on their tips. As she went limp again I came closer and whispered up to her, but she did not respond or look over at me, merely groaned and closed her eyes. A moment later she retched again, and then I was running, up the stairs and into the street, back once again to Di Lucci's bar.

Things went more smoothly this time than on the previous run: My grandfather was sitting on the terrace, and within a few minutes he and Di Lucci and I had piled into the Cinquecento and were back at the house. Di Lucci practically tripped over the basin of blood on the way into the stable, and I regretted that I had not hidden the blood and chicken away before, because while I had been running up to Di Lucci's I had remembered a visit that Giuseppina had paid my mother a month or two before; now I quickly moved the basin to one side and then tossed the chicken's limp body and severed head into some weeds along the back of the house. We found my mother crumpled against the wall of the pig pen, moaning softly, her head bowed forward and her hair tousled and dripping vomit, her arms clasped around her belly. Di Lucci helped her up and lurched with her up to his car, where my grandfather was waiting.

'Go tend the sheep,' my grandfather said to me. 'Your mother isn't going to die yet.'

As Di Lucci was climbing into his seat my grandfather said, 'Her hands are covered with blood'; but then the car was off, making its cloud of dust. I watched until it had veered onto the main road and disappeared around the hump of Colle di Papa, then hurried down to the stable.

I wished now that I had listened more attentively on that day when Giuseppina had come with an offer of cure, that my mother had not cut her off so quickly--it was important in these matters to be as precise as possible; the least deviation could wreck the charm, and lead perhaps to dangerous consequences. But now all the lore I had ever collected, bits and scraps gathered from overheard conversations at the fountain or at Di Lucci's, from my grandfather's stories, from the random horde of facts Fabrizio shared with me, seemed to have gotten jumbled up in my head in a great tangled heap: ways of hurting an enemy, putting glass in his foot prints, or roasting his coat over a slow fire; birds that shouldn't be killed except at certain times of the year, pheasants, wrens, because the killer would break a bone, or his cows would give bloody milk; places it was forbidden to spin or carry a spindle, along the highroad, or in front of a freshly seeded field, because the spinning would injure the crops; days when planting could not be started, any Friday, or the thirteenth day of any month; foods that should be eaten to ensure many children, oysters, pig's belly. And then the dozens of elaborate rituals, for making the rain fall, for driving off the evil eye, for aiding a birth, each of them carefully designed for precise effect, their power attested to by long years of tradition; but the one ritual which I wanted, and for which all the dark instruments I needed lay ready behind the stable, would not come to me.

Then, remembering suddenly my mother's bloodied hands, I picked out finally Giuseppina's nasal whine above the other voices in my head, and the whole sequence came clear to me: take a chicken and drain its blood; wash your hands in the blood; pour the blood into the ground;

burn the chicken on a pile of branches, in the same place where you poured. And the words: 'This is not chicken blood but my blood, which comes out of me like a chicken to the sea.' Now I had it, down to the last detail; I had only to make my preparations, then wait for night to cover my deeds.

There were risks, of course, inevitable risks which accrued whenever the spirits of darkness, with all their moody inconstancy and wrath, were chosen over the spirits of light: it was possible that my mother herself, grown desperate, had been preparing for just this rite (though it was hard to be sure why she had preserved that pan of chicken's blood--perhaps, as she sometimes did, she was merely planning to stir it into a sauce, to thicken it), when some slight error had angered the very spirit she was attempting to appease, and she had been gripped by the convulsions I had found her in. And there were practical considerations, too: perhaps Di Lucci, after all, had seen the slaughtered chicken and told my grandfather about it, so that at some point one dead chicken would have to be accounted for. My grandfather, at any rate, who remembered well years of famine when a half bowl of cornmeal at noon was the only meal that could be expected in a day, and when meat was eaten only on Easter Sunday, kept a very close watch over his livestock, and it was unlikely I could sneak a chicken away without the absence being noted.

But, steeling myself to accept these risks, remembering the many nights now that I had prayed to God with my hands clasped so tightly my knuckles turned white, reciting my ten Our Fathers, my five Hail Marys, adding my own prayer for the health and well-being of my mother and

grandfather, for the forgiveness of all their sins, whatever they might be, for an end to the silence and confusion--remembering all these fruitless prayers, and thinking of my mother lying again with the dead and dying in Rocca Secca, I resolved to carry the matter through, and started my preparations.

A little path led down from behind my grandfather's house through the ravine and into the pasture beyond; I usually marched the sheep along it when I took them out to graze. Now I followed it to a place where the trees and bushes were thickest, where dead growth and gnarled vines and fat thorny bushes created an almost solid wall; and pushing myself up through this wall, thorns and thistles catching at my clothes and skin, I came to a small clearing near the base of the old chestnut tree where one of my ancestors had hanged himself. The sun barely penetrated here, cloaked overhead by a thick mantle of autumn-coloured leaves layered thirty or forty feet high, and around the clearing's edges by the matted growth of saplings and bushes and brambles. A spongy layer of rotting leaves covered the ground, spotted with hundreds of nuts that had fallen from overhead, looking in their spiny husks like small, furry animals. The air was rich with the odour of humus and dank earth.

In this clearing I swept away a wide patch of rotting leaves, my fingers catching on worms and slugs and millipedes which I shook away with a shiver, until bare black earth was showing. Then I gathered up dried weeds, twigs, dead branches, and made a great pile of them near the patch of clear earth. Finally I made my way back to the house and collected the crucial talismans I had left there, first the pan of

blood, then, stuffing them into a burlap bag, the chicken body and head, and carried them to the pyre I had prepared in the heart of the ravine. There I hid them under the pile of twigs and branches, adding an extra curtain of dead leaves on top, lest anyone should stumble upon my shrine before I had had a chance to perform my work. As a last preparation I went into the house, took a box of matches from the fireplace mantle, and carried them up to my room, where I stuffed them under my pillow. Now I had only to wait for darkness.

The sun seemed to ride the sky at a sluggish pace that afternoon, lingering long beyond its appointed time a few feet above the ridge of mountains that rose up to the west of Castilucci, burning more bright and red and fierce than was usual for that time of the year. The sheep, too, seemed to sense that something was amiss; after an hour or so of calm grazing they grew distracted, began wandering from the flock or bolting suddenly for no apparent reason, like things possessed. I peeled a branch off an old tree and tried to beat them into complacence, but my angry slashing and chasing only seemed to excite them further, and when the sun finally sank behind the mountains, with the slowness of a warm balloon, I was worn out by my efforts.

When I'd finally ushered the sheep back into the stable, a cold wind creeping now along the fringes of nightfall, I found my grandfather sitting at the kitchen table, sullen and distracted, a half glass of wine in front of him.

'Did mamma come back,' I asked cautiously.

'Make yourself something to eat,' he said. 'Your mother's staying in the hospital for a few days.'

I ate some bread and cheese in silence and went up to my room relieved that my grandfather had not asked about the chicken. In a few hours everything would be set right; my mother, lying in her hospital bed, would feel the illness weighing on her begin to lift, and when she returned home it would be to smiles and laughter and loud conversation, all the unpleasantness and silence of the past few months forgotten. In my room I pulled on a heavy sweater in readiness and then tried to study my school books for a while, to make sense of long trains of numbers and symbols which demanded solutions, but found myself returning again and again to the balcony, where cold wisps of cloud were flitting across a crescent moon. Eventually I turned out my lamp and waited for my grandfather, on the floor below me, to do the same; but for a long time a dull glow continued to bleed from the window of his room, and a dozen times I found myself nodding against my balcony railing, before a blast of cold wind made me wake with a shiver.

Finally the light from my grandfather's room died, only the thin moon and a few stars giving any shape now to the blackness beyond my balcony. In darkness I sat on the chair beside my bed and waited, counting first to a thousand, rolling the numbers off in my mind, seeing them take form there, as if cut out of stone, then, after a moment of hesitation, counting to a thousand again, to make sure my grandfather would have fallen asleep. Finally, carrying matches and darkened lamp in one hand, I picked my way quietly down the stairs, inched open the door, and slipped into the street.

Outside the village was quiet and still. It must have been later than I had imagined, for not a single light was shining along via San

Giuseppe, even up at Di Lucci's, where drinking and card playing often went on late into the night. It gave me an eerie feeling to think that all the other villagers were warm in their beds while I stood alone and unwatched in the street. Some secret village seemed to be lurking there in the darkness, one that could not be seen in the light of day, when human voices broke the stillness and silence. Now there was only the chill wind to whisper to me, and the pale moon to light my way; God himself, in this darkened silence, might have curled himself under a cloud of quiet forgetfulness, and not seen a small boy who was making his way now down the side of his grandfather's house and into the deeper darkness of a bramble-choked ravine and a tree-cloaked clearing.

Dry twigs snapped beneath my feet as I crept into the blackness of the ravine; crickets whispered to me from the safety of grass and nameless birds rustled in branches overhead. I had not dared yet to light my lamp; I would wait until I was safely sheltered in my little hollow. I could barely make my way now, proceeding more by touch than sight, holding out my hand like a blind person to feel the hedge of bushes that lined the narrow path, looking for the break I had made earlier in the day where I would branch off to the clearing. I missed it on the first pass, found myself moving towards open moonlight again, turned back and walked more slowly, found the place and began to push my way through the thorns and bushes, shielding my face with an upraised arm. When I gained the clearing, which was wrapped now in a pall of almost solid black, I fumbled in my matchbox and lit my lamp, keeping the flame low and squat, just bright enough to light a small, private bubble of clarity around me. The clearing was just as I had left it, a circle of bare

earth waiting damp and black, a pile of leaves and branches and dead grass looming to one side of it.

I pushed aside the heap of branches to uncover the basin and burlap bag I had hidden there. In the basin dead leaves and strands of grass floated atop a pool of inky blood; I plucked them out, one by one, then pushed up my sleeves and lowered myself onto my haunches to place my hands, palms down, into the basin. The blood had turned thick and cold in the night air, and it oozed like mud between my fingers and over the wrinkles and cracks on my knuckles. I buried my hands in the basin for a long moment, then slowly lifted them and rubbed them together until a thin layer of blood was spread evenly over my skin all the way up to my wrists. Then I carefully poured the blood into the centre of the bare patch of earth, where it sat for a moment in a viscous puddle before seeping finally into the ground. With a stick I scraped free the blood that clung to the basin's sides and bottom, adding it to the rest, and then I spoke the words, in a low whisper:

This is not chicken blood but my blood
Which comes out of me like a chicken to the sea.

I shivered. The blood on my hands was starting to dry, sending little chills up my arms and into my spine. I waited for it to dry completely, waving my hands through the cold air, then quickly pushed the pile of leaves and branches over the spot where I had poured the blood. Finally I picked up the burlap bag and dumped chicken and severed head onto the ground. The head still stared out from lidless eyes, mouth agape, on the verge of cackling, and the body was still flaccid, not yet stiff with death, though the clot around its neck had grown hard and

black, and its feathers were askew from my rough handling. I prepared a little hollow at the top of my pyre and was about to lay the chicken into it when I realized that I could recall nothing, from Giuseppina's instructions, about the chicken's head. But perhaps the head deserved no special treatment: wasn't it, after all, simply a part of the chicken? And yet it seemed to me now there was something in Giuseppina's instructions I had forgotten, some part of the chicken which should be spared, like a charm, to guarantee the ritual's success. For the first time in the course of my preparations doubt crept up on me, and I suddenly felt in danger of jinxing the whole operation.

For matters like this, it was always possible to devise a test. I found a sturdy stick about a foot long and shoved it into the earth as far as I could, then impaled the chicken head on the end of it. Now, with my eyes closed, I would twist the stick between my bloody palms, three full palm-lengths to the right, three full palm-lengths to the left, then a few random turns in either direction, to allow the forces of fate to do their work. If when I opened my eyes the beak was facing towards me, I would keep the head; if away, then it would perish in the flames with its severed trunk.

I stretched myself out on my stomach, closed my eyes, and started the turning. I made up a little charm as I went along, singing it lowly to the tune of a local song:

Coccia de gallina, bianc' e ross'
Giri a sinistr' e giri a destr'
Dimi presto come vuoi girar
Dimi addesso si non vuoi bruciar!

Head of a chicken, red and white

Turn to the left and turn to the right

Tell me quick how you want to turn

Tell me quick if you don't want to burn!

I opened my eyes to find myself staring directly into the the dark hollow of the chicken's gaping beak, not a degree of deviation in either direction--the spirits had sent a clear message.

'*Grazie, signor Gallina*,' I whispered, then in courtesy turned the head towards the pile of branches so it could watch the sacrifice of its nether part.

I placed the chicken's limp body atop its pyre; after a moment's hesitation I draped the burlap bag over it, as a shroud, then made a little pile of dead leaves and grass at the pyre's base, as kindling. The match box I had with me had only four matches left in it, and the leaves and grass were damp now from the cold night air; but on the third match the pile began to smoulder and then burst into flames, and I sat back to watch my offering burn.

The pyre burned slowly at first, hissing and sizzling with moisture and sending up clouds of grey smoke, the damp leaves that blanketed the wood muffling the flames. But slowly the fire moved around the base and up the side of the pile, spreading into a fiery triangle, dried branches crackling now into flame and shooting little sparks towards where I sat watching. At my back I still felt the night's cold creeping down my neck and into the space between my sweater and my pants, but my face and hands now were flushed with heat. I stared into the fire, growing drowsy, mesmerized by its long, flickering spears of yellow and red.

Finally the flames began to lick at the burlap bag at the top of a pyre. For a moment they licked without consequence, but parched finally by them the bag burst suddenly into flame. It burned with a quickness and force that blasted my face with heat--suddenly tall shafts of fire were leaping so high they were singeing the dying leaves on overhanging branches, the leaves sizzling and then popping into flame like stars. I moved now from sleepy comfort to instant, gut-churning terror: the fire was growing beyond my control, and in a moment the chestnut tree would go up like a great torch, and the fire would spill across the ravine. It would only be a matter of time, then, before the whole sleeping village was up in flames, for all the stables along via San Giuseppe were chock-full of dry hay and straw from the harvest.

I saw now that fire had begun to spread along one side of the pyre across the clearing and towards the bushes and saplings and dead weeds at the clearing's edge, feeding its low flames on fallen leaves and dead grass as it went. I went over quickly to stamp out these creeping flames, but gusts of heat and smoke burned at my eyes and throat. I stepped back to recover and then made a second attempt, but there were a few small fires I couldn't get to, and they continued edging their way towards the fire-ripe bushes in their path, as nearby the pyre still roared with heat and flame.

Then, as quickly as it had reared up in fury, the fire gave up a few last tongues of tall flame and settled once again into a low comfortable burning--the burlap bag, it seemed, had burnt itself out, as had the shell of dead leaves and the pyre's outer branches, so that the fire was slowly retreating inwards, muffled somewhat by a cloak of dying ashes.

Now I was able to stamp out the remaining small fires that had been inching across the clearing, grinding them into the dirt and humus to make sure no sparks remained. Overhead, the chestnut tree did not seem to have been seriously affected: in a few weeks autumn would have claimed all its leaves, and the few that had perished tonight in the fire would not be missed.

I could make out clearly now the outlines of the sacrificial chicken atop the sinking heap of burning wood--the black stump of its neck, the charred feathers, the scrawny legs and hooked claws, gnarled from the heat. But despite the fire's recent fury, the chicken seemed to have lost little bulk from its ordeal. I had expected it to burn up like a log, crumble finally into a heap of glowing ashes, but there it still lay in its solid mass, weighing down its pyre, refusing to give itself up to the spirits of the fire.

I added a few more faggots of wood, cautiously, then a few handfuls of dead leaves, watched the flames leap up in momentary fervor, then dwindle again. There was still a mass of unburnt wood in the pile's centre: the fire would be a while in dying, and perhaps these slow, patient flames would eat more surely at the chicken's flesh than the wilder ones had done. I sat myself down to wait the fire out, feeling suddenly exhausted, remembering that it was the middle of the night and that I had not yet had any sleep. I stared into the fire, letting it lull me slowly into sleep, my mind drifting into dreams and strange visions: my mother crouched in a field, as if taking a shit, but getting up to reveal a large blue egg; Father Nick, standing before a coffin and reciting a funeral mass, to the wail of mourners, for a Mr. Mario

Gallina; myself, dressed in white feathers from head to foot, and madly flapping large, awkward wings that refused to lift me off the ground; a red mass of flesh held out in someone's outstretched palm, shifting and squirming there as if alive.

I woke stiff and numb, my bones chilled from the dampness of the air and ground, my bladder aching, and my eyes sore with sleeplessness. Beside me my lamp sat dead and cold, its fuel used up, its glass grey with soot. The pyre, by now, had burnt down to glowing embers. But the chicken had held its ground: it lay serenely in a pile of ashes and charred wood, most of the feathers burned away, blackened quills jutting out of blackened flesh, but the body still intact, though somewhat shrunken. Something had gone wrong. Then it came to me, out of an image from my dreams, the bloody mass of flesh--a heart, the small, nervous heart of a chicken, which I remembered now was the part that should have been set aside, and cooked into a pot of soup. I had mistaken head for heart--somewhere inside the chicken's shrivelled corpse the heart still lay sheltered, protecting the corpse from the fire spirits, while the head gaped at me in open-mouthed mockery from atop its observation post.

But I couldn't take the risk of going through the whole procedure again--through a few gaps in the underbrush I could see that the eastern sky was already tinged with the deep blue of pre-dawn, and soon many of the villagers would be rising to go to their fields to harvest their grapes and olives. So I would simply have to dispose of the body, and hope that the ritual had worked anyway, or at least not done any harm. I unbuttoned my fly now and emptied my bladder onto the remnants of the

fire, holding my shrivelled bird gingerly in my blood-stained hand and watching my urine steam against the glowing embers. I used clumps of dirt to cool down the chicken's corpse so I could lay hold of it and move it away, then covered the ashes and remaining embers from the fire with dirt as well, stamping it down to make sure I had killed the fire thoroughly before covering the area again with dead leaves and fallen nuts. I pulled the chicken head off its stick and threw it into the bloody basin along with the charred corpse, then made my way, lamp swinging from one arm, through the ravine and towards the steep slope that led up to the road. The chicken's corpse I tossed into the clay pipe that came under the road from the fountain, fire into water, stuffing it down as far as I could with a long stick; then I shimmied up to the road and washed my hands and the basin free of blood under the fountain's cold stream. The world was filled already with grey light by the time I slipped back inside the house, my chicken head stuffed into a pocket of my pants, and crept upstairs into my room. I put the head in one of my socks and hid it under my mattress.

That morning I failed to get up when my grandfather called me to feed and water the animals--this was normally my mother's job--and he had to do it himself.

'What happened to the chicken your mother was cleaning when she got sick yesterday,' he said irritably when I finally came down for breakfast.

I shrugged.

'Idiot,' he said. 'You should have known enough to bring it inside. Some dog probably walked off with it.'

At school that day I kept nodding off at my desk.

'Vi-ttoh-ri-oh!' the teacher called out once, in a sing-song. She had been being suspiciously nice to me since my fight with Vincenzo. '*Ma che, dormi*? You must be upset. I heard your mother is in the hospital again.'

'Yes,' I said, coming out of a dream. 'But she's going to get better.'

'Of course,' the teacher said. 'Of course she is.'

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XXIV--FIVE FEET LONG

Boys in Valle del Sole, as elsewhere, were famous for their treachery and senseless cruelty. There was not a quirk or lapse they did not punish with the appropriate taunts and insults, not a show of irresolution or weakness which they did not meet with elbows to the ribs and knees to the groin. Stories spread about bed wetting, about strange behaviour with the animals in the stable, about kindnesses shown to one of the village girls, and that was the end of your status, and the beginning of hell; and sometimes it was simply enough for the boys to sense your fear of them, like dogs or wolves, for them to be at your heels, hounding you with a meanness that was dispensed almost casually, with indifference, as if the prospect of such an easy kill bored them. If God moved at all through the streets of Valle del Sole, he surely had no truck with boys--they lived in a world of their own, where the hard
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little core of evil they were born with was allowed for a while to flourish unchecked, as if in preparation for a hardy manhood.

I had early sensed this truth about the village boys, and, knowing that I could not live up to their code of honour, had steered clear of them. I might, like some of my classmates, have taken refuge with the girls--like Gaetano Di Menna, for instance, who walked to school every morning with a group of them, and who whispered and giggled with them during class like one of their own. But Gaetano--called, by most of the boys, Gaetana--seemed to have some special immunity which allowed him to carry on like that without serious injury: the other boys regarded him with a sort of mocking good humour, but generally left him in peace, exempting him from their rules. I, though, did not have Gaetano's affability, and found the girls, in their way, as alien and inaccessible as the boys. Whether they had their own oppressive codes of conduct, devised games as cruel as those of the boys to torture their peers, I did not know--they lived in a world almost entirely cut off from that of boys, played in kitchens and dark courtyards rather than in the streets or in the wilds of Colle di Papa, stayed home to cook or clean when the boys went out to the fields, and generally kept to themselves except to stick out a tongue at a taunt or jeer or answer a pulled pigtail with a kick to the shin.

And so I numbered among my friends only one short, bony-elbowed, eternally grinning Fabrizio, who was forbidden now, by parental decree, from having any dealings with me, who at our last meeting I had struck with a rock, in anger and shame, and who it seemed had recently become a primary school drop-out, having not shown up for a single day of school

since the beginning of term. And Fabrizio, at any rate, was marked by the same curse as I was: being with him was almost like being alone, the world of true boyhood and capers one from which we were excluded, our intimacy only reinforcing our isolation, and I nursed a small resentment towards him for this, for reminding me of that part of myself which more and more, as time went on, I grew to hate.

But for all the anger and hate slowly building in me, saints and holiness still filled my head during this time, as they long had, inscribing my dreams of vindication with the sanction of religion: Vittorio reciting his catechism correctly from beginning to end during one of Father Nick's visits, and throwing in a few passages from the bible to boot; Vittorio serving as spiritual counsellor to the sinning multitudes of Valle del Sole, calmly dispensing wisdom and advice in a shady grove by the fountain; Vittorio curing the sick and dying, changing water into wine, doing wonderful things with loaves and fishes on Colle di Papa while the crowds spread around him like a sea. But now these New Testament visions became tainted with images from older stories, such as I had heard Father Nick recite occasionally from the pulpit: God mowing down enemies like Egyptians or Canaanites, swallowing them into the sea or littering the mountains and valleys with their bloody corpses; God visiting the sins of the fathers upon the sons, unto the third and fourth generations, my classmates suddenly struck dead in their chairs for long-forgotten crimes; God sending brimstone and fire to destroy a wicked village nestled in the mountains, leaving only a small child and his mother to escape.

And so my need for vindication, which had been growing in me ever

since I'd begun to recognize myself as somehow set apart, or set aside, had resolved itself into two distinct poles: acceptance or vengeance, each of them conceived on a grand scale, in inverse proportion to my own growing sense of powerlessness and fear. But perhaps because I was still as willing to accept the former as the latter, and because I had grown desperate for some quick stroke that would put an end to my troubles, desperate enough to creep into a ravine in the dead of night and offer myself to the forces of darkness, I became an easy prey for the cruelty of boys, so that treachery, when it came, both that of my classmates and my own, took me unawares.

Since my fight with Vincenzo, I had taken to coming to school very early in the morning. While this meant that I had to put up with the taunts and insults of the other boys when they filed past me to their own desks, I was spared the danger of finding them waiting for me in ambush outside the classroom. La maestra, perhaps guessing the reason for my early arrivals, had since then taken to keeping me after classes to sweep the classroom. In the past she had usually asked one of the older boys but now, to the chuckles and snickers of the other boys, it was always me that she held back before we shuffled out of class at the end of the day.

'Vittorio, *per favore*,' she'd say with forced sternness, as if meting out a punishment, 'you'll stay behind today to sweep.'

But there was no use in her adopting this tone--my classmates saw through it, knew that the status I had held the previous year as a godless, recalcitrant child was giving way to a new position as teacher's favourite. I almost longed now for the old days, when, misunderstood, I

had at least enjoyed a certain amount of notoriety among the other boys for my crimes. I was grateful, though, that the teacher put her request in the form of a command: I had no choice then but to obey, could tell myself that I stayed against my wishes, and, resigned to my fate, take up the short corn-broom in the back corner and apply myself with a vengeance to my cleaning, hoping the other boys would have gone home to their chores by the time I finished. And so far the system had worked--since my mother's attack on Maria I'd had only the taunts and whispers in class to put up with.

The price I paid for this amnesty, though, was a heavy one. Every afternoon when I left the classroom I had to pass la maestra perched over exercise books at her desk and accept the '*Grazie*, Vittorio,' she meted out to me with her look of saint-like pity. It was that look I couldn't bear. It made me squirm and twitch, because it filled me both with revulsion and with another feeling I couldn't quite pin down: a sort of self-hatred, for that part of me which was thankful for the teacher's kindness and pity. And I knew, at any rate, that the amnesty was only a temporary one, that great forces were gathering against me, preparing a day of reckoning, and that la maestra--or my mother, for that matter--would not be there when some rough hand dragged me behind a bush and paid me with a fist for the protection I'd received from my women.

But the reckoning did not come in fists. It started, in fact, quite casually, when I stepped out of the classroom on a grey October afternoon and saw a classmate of mine, Antonio Trattidore, sitting quite openly and without apparent malice on the church steps. It had been

three days since I had burned the chicken in the ravine and thrown its charred corpse into the drainpipe under the road, but as yet I had noticed no dramatic changes in my life: my mother was still in the hospital, and my grandfather was still sullen and silent, sitting home all day in his room now, not even bothering to go up to Di Lucci's. Vincenzo, it was true, had not sneered at me today when he'd walked past my seat on his way to his own; and Alfreddo, the leader of Vincenzo's gang, had not whispered '*citro di mamma*,' mama's boy; but perhaps they had simply grown bored of these little assaults, and were saving their forces for some larger attack.

Antonio Trattidore, a gangly, stoop-shouldered boy whose body didn't seem to have any support to it, as if he were made of straw, was the class clown. He was repeating the second form for the third time--the story went that he was trying to stretch out his four years of schooling as long as possible, to put off going into the fields. In class, Antonio could not open his mouth without something peculiar coming out of it, though his delivery was always so straight-faced and measured that it was impossible to tell if he was joking or if he simply couldn't make sense of the world in the way other people did.

'Antonio Trattidore,' the teacher would ask, 'why did Joseph and Mary have to stay in a stable when they were in Bethlehem?'

'Well,' Antonio would start, rising up slowly from his chair and lifting a gangly arm to rub his hand across the back of his head, 'in those days all the hotels were owned by the Fascists--'; but already the class would be in stitches, and even the teacher's face would crack into a reproving smile.

Antonio had never really shown me any ill will, but he moved with Alfreddo's gang, so I was a little suspicious when I saw him sitting on the church steps. But Antonio did not seem to notice me as I walked past him towards the stairway that led to the square; he was busy getting a fleck of snot out of his nose, face screwed up in concentration. Just as I reached the head of the stairway, though, he spoke.

'Do you have any matches?' he said. I stopped and looked back at him; he was staring intently now, eyes narrowed, at a small, dark spot on the end of his finger.

'It doesn't really matter if you don't have any,' he went on, talking to his finger, but then looking up finally with a serious, almost sad expression, 'because Alfreddo probably does. But he told me to come and ask you, just in case.'

Why would Alfreddo want matches from me? Antonio was just talking; or he had made some kind of mistake.

'I have to go tend the sheep,' I said; but still I stood unmoving at the top of the stairway.

'You don't have to worry about the sheep,' Antonio said after a moment, wiping his finger slowly and meticulously on his pants. 'Alfreddo spoke to Fabrizio and he's going to take them out for you. Your grandfather said it would be all right. Didn't the teacher tell you? She must have forgot.'

Antonio was looking at me now so matter-of-factly that I felt embarrassed I hadn't heard yet about all these arrangements. I looked back towards the classroom; I had left the teacher there only a minute before, and she would still be sitting at her desk, head bent over

exercise books. Surely Antonio wouldn't lie, with her so close? I had only to walk the few yards to the classroom and ask her--

'I have to go,' I said, but very uncertain now about where I had to go, or why.

'I thought you were coming up on the mountain,' Antonio said. 'That's why I was waiting for you. Alfreddo said you were coming up to smoke some cigarettes.' He was at the hospital yesterday to see his aunt from Tornamonde and he asked your mother if you could be part of our gang. She said that was all right. When someone's in the hospital it's usually a good idea to smoke some cigarettes. It helps to keep away the spirits.'

Antonio had my head spinning with all these complicities. I stood for a moment completely confused, wondering how the world could change so quickly from a hostile place into this paragon of chumminess and concern that Antonio was presenting, everyone working together for the sake of poor Vittorio. Then suddenly it dawned on me; the chicken was beginning to take effect. I thought about the head still wrapped in a sock under my mattress and decided that I had made the right decision after all, that perhaps the head had made up for the heart. I had been saying a little song to it every morning to help the spell:

Head of a chicken, white and red
Watching me from under my bed
Keep me safe from harm and hurt
Or I'll stick you in the dirt.

It had taken a little time, but that was how it was with these things; sometimes the spirits had to be cajoled, egged on, but once they had

decided, well, that was that. Things changed.

Antonio had stood up and was waiting for me to join him.

'We'd better go,' he said, as if there had never been any doubt about my coming along. 'They're all waiting for you up on the mountain.' And when I came up to him he put a long, gangly arm around my shoulders.

'We meet up on the mountain all the time,' he said, leading me up the path that rose up behind the church. 'Once you're a member you can come whenever you want.'

It was funny that Fabrizio and I, who had spent many long hours wandering on the mountain, had never come upon Alfreddo and his gang there. It was funny also how the path Antonio led me by, through brush and long grass and small shrubs and trees, up patches of bare rock, down patches of bare rock, avoiding always the established foot paths used by hunters and farmers, seemed so complicated and long. I had been over that wooded slope a hundred times and never lost my way, but now I was confused and disoriented. It almost seemed as if we were going around in circles, up and then down again, past footprints that looked suspiciously like our own, through long grass that had been very recently trampled.

'We're almost there,' Antonio kept saying. 'You've probably never been to this part of the mountain before. We had to make a special map so people would remember how to get there.'

But when we finally arrived at a sheltered clearing I could have sworn it was the same place where Fabrizio and I used to come to smoke our cigarettes. Now, though, it was filled with a dozen or so boys

around my age and older, seated on rocks or leaning against the trunks of trees and passing a lit cigarette round the rough circle they formed. Alfreddo was sitting on a rock at the head of the circle, inside a hollow like the one Fabrizio and I had often sat in.

'Oh, *finalmente*!' he said, as Antonio and I broke through the undergrowth into the clearing, and then a little chorus of cheers went up, shouts of 'Hey look, it's Vittorio!' and 'Ho, Vittò!', the boys breaking formation to come over and slap me on the back or shake my hand. I stood there giddy with the attention, my face flushed, wondering why more people didn't go out and burn a chicken when they were in difficulty.

It was Vincenzo himself, coming up with a thumb cocked in his belt, his ruddy face all smiles and good will, who offered me a cigarette.

'Here,' he said, passing the cigarette and clapping a hand on my shoulder. 'Friends, eh?'

I took a long drag on the cigarette and pulled the smoke deep into my lungs, to prove my worth; but I was out of practice, and the smoke burned at my throat and set off a fit of coughing. Vincenzo, though, was all concern; he patted my back gently to help clear my lungs, and when I recovered another chorus of cheers went up from the boys gathered around me, with more shoulder clapping and back slapping. It didn't matter now if I could hold my smoke; I'd already become one of the gang, could relish the bliss of a worthiness already proved, everyone gathered around me as if I were Christ returned from the grave.

'Hey Vittorio.' It was Alfreddo; he was the only one who had not stood up to greet me, seated in his rocky hollow like a king on his

throne, brown corduroy cap cocked to one side, legs stretched out regally across the bare ground in front of him. He had a long, lank body that did not look as if it would stand up well in a fight; but his air of calm confidence attracted other boys to him like a magnet, and his control over his group was absolute.

'We hope you're not angry about those names we called you,' he said, smiling warmly. Alfreddo always spoke in a low drawl that was almost a whisper, as if anything louder or faster might disturb his own inner calm. 'We were just having a joke. Here, come over and sit beside me.' Alfreddo patted the ground beside him softly. When I had settled beside him on the clammy earth he put an warm arm around me, and as if on cue the other boys reformed their rough circle. For a moment nobody spoke, looking expectantly towards me and Alfreddo.

'Antonio told me you saw my mother at the hospital,' I said finally.

'Did he?' Alfreddo said, in his low drawl, lifting his head with the slowness of a great bird to look over at Antonio. 'At the hospital. That's right. Eh, Antonio?'

'That's right,' Antonio said. 'You saw her yesterday, when you went to visit your sick aunt from Tornamonde. She said it was all right if Vittorio joined our group.'

Now all the boys in the circle were nodding their heads vigourously and murmuring their agreement. 'That's right, he saw her yesterday. In the hospital. When he went to see his sick aunt.'

'She told me to ask you,' Alfreddo said, with an encouraging smile, 'what happened that day in the stable when the snake bit her. She said you saw the whole thing.'

But now suddenly my thoughts began to clot; the giddiness from the warm reception and from the cigarette smoke turned momentarily to confusion and fear.

'I only saw a snake,' I said, flushing. 'I saw it coming out of the stable through the door.'

'Through the door,' Alfreddo said, pursing his lips and nodding. 'And what colour was the snake?'

'Green,' I said.

'Green,' Alfreddo said, smiling, and around the circle the other boys smiled too, as if there was something funny about a green snake.

'And how long was the snake?' Alfreddo said.

I shrugged.

'Three feet long? Four? Five?'

'Five,' I said.

'Five feet long! *Dio mio*, a green snake five feet long!' And now Alfreddo, arm still around my shoulders, had begun to laugh, a low laugh of surprise and amazement, and the other boys around the circle were beginning to laugh too, and whispering, 'Five feet long! Think of that!' But it was the snake they were laughing at, I could see, not me: they had never seen a snake that long before, and the thought of it filled them with wonder.

'And it had two big white teeth,' I added, 'and big blue eyes,' starting to laugh myself now; and seeing me laugh the other boys laughed harder, slapping their knees and holding onto each other for support, their laughter filling the clearing. 'Big white teeth!' they laughed, and 'Big blue eyes!', rolling on the ground now in mirth, until finally

by degrees the laughter began to die down and the boys resumed their places, still shaking their heads and muttering to themselves, 'Five feet long! *Jesu e Maria.*'

'We need someone like you in our group,' Alfreddo said, drawing close to me again. 'To make us laugh. We haven't had a good laugh like that for a long time. But before we make you a member, I have to tell you something serious.'

The group went suddenly quiet, leaning forward to listen to Alfreddo.

'You know what they say about a snake,' he said to me. 'They say that if a man is bitten by a snake, then it means his wife has been with another man.' He paused now and looked at me gravely, then gazed slowly around the circle to a chorus of nods and agreeing whispers. 'But if a woman gets bitten by a snake--well, it's a bad business then. It means the next baby she has,' his voice dropping now even lower than its usual whisper, his lips only inches from my ear, 'will have the head of a snake. I'm telling you this because if you ever go to America, you have to make sure that your father never sleeps in the same bed with your mother, or they'll do the thing to make babies. And then the only thing you can do'--he made a quick jabbing motion with his clenched fist, and I started back--'is kill the baby with a knife the minute it's born, and cut out its eyes, so the evil eye won't be able to follow you.'

But as soon as Alfreddo had finished speaking he seemed suddenly to lose all interest in me, and sat back against the rock face behind him, pulled a small jack-knife out his pocket, and began cleaning his nails. It was a long minute before he spoke again, this time in a new tone,

distant and slightly ominous.

'Did Antonio tell you what you have to do to become a member?'

'I didn't tell him,' Antonio said, 'because the teacher was following us, and I didn't want her to hear about it.'

Well--that explained the tortured path we had taken. But surely we had shaken her? I looked around the clearing now, to see if she might not be hiding behind some bush or tree.

'So,' Alfreddo said, not noticing my concern, 'this is how we do it. First you have to show your bird, to prove you're a man. Everyone here had to do it when they joined. Isn't that right?' Everyone in the group nodded and mumbled in agreement.

'That means,' Alfreddo went on, smiling, though not as warmly as before, 'we pull down your pants to see how big it is. If it's big enough, you can join. It has to be at least half as long as a cigarette.'

So I was not yet worthy after all: there was a test. The thought of pulling my pants down to show all these boys my little bird gave me a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach, as if I had just swallowed a glass of cod liver oil. My mother had said once, when she had administered a dose of the stuff during an illness, that the Fascists had forced people to drink cod liver oil before the war, to test their loyalty. She told me then that the best way to drink it was to imagine that it was simply a glass of water mixed with melted sugar.

Now Alfreddo was pointing to a small hole in the ground a few feet in front of him, in the centre of the circle of boys. A little ring of loose dirt around it showed that it had been freshly dug.

'After you show everyone,' Alfreddo said, 'you put it in the hole and move it up and down fifty times. Make sure you go as deep as you can. The rest of us will stand around you and count out loud. When you reach fifty, then you're a member.'

I was struggling now to overcome the nausea that was growing in my gut. Hadn't the other members of the group done the same thing? Wasn't this simply one of those things that was done, exactly the kind of thing I didn't know about because I had never been a member of the gangs? If I showed any resistance now, I knew, it would simply prove my unworthiness. But a part of me already doing little mental calculations, trying to remember the last time I'd peed and whether or not my small organ could cover half the length of a filterless cigarette.

But in a moment the decision was entirely out of my hands, for on a nod from Alfreddo two boys came over to where I was sitting and lifted me up by the armpits, carried me to the centre of the circle, and laid me face-up on the rough ground. They knelt down on either side of me to hold my arms, while Alfreddo rose slowly from his throne and came over to straddle me, his long, lanky body towering over me for a minute before he lowered his buttocks onto my ankles. All the other boys had stood up and were gathered around me now, the sky was obscured by a sea of wide-eyed faces, the boys peering down from above like a flock of strange birds.

Alfreddo had started unbuckling me, with a ritual slowness--first my cracked leather belt, pulling the loose end through the pant loops with a low hiss of leather against cloth and then releasing the hole from its pin with a sudden flick; long fingers moving then to the buttons, the

two at my waist, the three that inched down my fly. As he reached up finally to my hips to pull down my pants and underwear his nails scratched against my skin and a tremor of fear and revolt passed through my body. But even if I had wished to bolt now I could not have: my body was held to the ground as if nailed there. I could only watch helplessly, head tilted forward, as Alfreddo dragged my clothes to my knees and exposed my shrivelled member to the cold air of a grey October afternoon.

They boys were looking down on me now with jaws open, eyes wide.

'Look at the size of that,' Vincenzo Maiale said. 'It must be five feet long.' But no one laughed.

'*E veramente forte*,' Alfreddo said, pursing his lips and nodding, then leaning back so that everyone could have a better look. The other boys nodded and mumbled in agreement.

'It's almost as big as a mule's,' one of the boys said, and then Antonio Trattidore reached down and grabbed the wrinkled end of it between thumb and forefinger, moving it back and forth to inspect it.

'It's not the regular kind,' he said finally, and for a moment my blood froze in fear; but Antonio went on. 'This is the kind they used to have before the war. You can tell because it has more meat on it.' And everyone agreed that Antonio was right. But then someone suggested that it was more like the kind the Africans had, and that maybe one of my great-grandfathers had been an African; and someone else said it was in America you found birds like that, so it meant one day I would go to America. A short discussion followed, each of the boys taking sides, arguing about colour and length and thickness, comparing my bird to

other birds they had seen; but no conclusion was reached. I, meanwhile, still lay splayed out on the ground, my pants to my knees, my bared buttocks growing cold and clammy against the dirt.

'Give me a cigarette,' Alfreddo said finally. 'We'll do the test.'

Vincenzo reached into his pocket and handed Alfreddo a wrinkled cigarette. But just as Alfreddo was reaching forward to apply the measure, the eyes of all the other boys glued to my groin, he let out a yell and lurched forward onto my chest, his hand going up to the back of his head. Suddenly, the clearing was filled with shouts and confusion: the boys that had been standing around me were shouting curses and running towards some distraction behind Alfreddo, the two at my arms quickly joining the fray, and Alfreddo, quickly recovering from whatever blow had felled him, leaping up in one quick motion and raising his voice for the first time that afternoon: '*Ammazzatelo!*'

Kill him. There, at the far edge of the clearing, wielding a long, thick stick which he whirled back and forth in a mad semi-circle, striking anyone who came in his path, face screwed up with his effort, was Fabrizio, answering curse for curse the abuse which the other boys were hurling at him.

'Go to the devils!' he was shouting. 'I'll break the heads of every one of you!'

And for a moment it seemed he would: time and again his stick found its mark, striking against elbows and ribs and heads with a dull thud, the other boys letting out yelps of pain and stepping back for a moment to nurse their wounds before returning again to the fray. But what had gotten into him? He had ruined my chances now, that was certain, and as

I struggled up from the ground still trying to button my pants I felt myself filling with anger and hatred, which welled up from some source I couldn't recognize, all of it directed at Fabrizio: Fabrizio, my only friend, with his knobby knees and scrawny arms and stupid stories, who shared his bedroom with the goats, who was as worthless and outcast as I was, and was even now destroying my chances of ever belonging. I hated him at that moment, more than I had ever hated Vincenzo or Alfreddo or any of the boys who tortured me every day at school, hated him as if he were something inside me that had slowly poisoned my blood and left me writhing with pain and helplessness. And I hated him even though an awful truth was forcing itself on me, my mind racing over the events of the afternoon and beginning to see the cracks and flaws in the surface of them, and the ugly underside that lay beneath.

Alfreddo had stepped into the fray now, and as Fabrizio's stick arched in the air towards him he reached out a swift hand and caught the stick in his open palm, then quickly closed his other hand around the first and yanked mightily. Fabrizio, his own hands still gripped tightly around the stick, lurched forward and fell to the ground. In a moment the other boys were on him, and Fabrizio was shouting, 'Oh, Vittò, get the stick!' But I was already running, wildly, racing through thick bush and brambles, thorns catching me and branches slashing against my face. I tumbled down rocky slopes that scraped my shins and cut my palms, emerged finally breathless and bleeding behind the church but kept running, down the steps, down the street, all the while holding back a great wailing, until finally I had slammed myself into my own room, where I dragged out from under the bed the sock that held the

chicken's head and flung it from my balcony towards the ravine, as far as my small arm could manage.

Now, at last, I threw myself on my winged bed and let the flood break, crying until my head pounded and my chest ached from the sobs. And I did not have to wait until the following morning, when Alfreddo whispered 'Five feet long!' as he passed by my desk, to a loud chorus of laughter from the boys coming in with him, to know that I had betrayed Fabrizio, as surely as if I had walked up behind him and pushed a knife in his back, and that I had sunk so low in shame now that no magic or miracle could ever reclaim me.

XXV--LIVES OF THE SAINTS

Whatever my mother had swallowed to stop the swelling that day I'd found her retching in the stable hadn't had the desired effect. Her system, apparently, had been too well designed. For my part, though, Alfreddo's warnings of snake heads and evil eyes still lingering in my head, I did not dare to guess the meaning of the long, loose dresses she had begun to wear, ones that fell straight at the waist, and that hid for a while the slow swelling going on underneath them; but no one else in Valle del Sole could have failed to understand the import of them.

My mother had come back from the hospital with little fanfare, in Cazzingulo's truck, after being away for more than a week. Since then not a single word, not even so much as a grunt or a nod, had passed in my presence between my mother and my grandfather. It was as if they simply did not see each other, moving through the same house, the same room, as if they only sensed each other's alien presence lurking like a shadow nearby, and kept clear of it. For a few days after my mother's return, my grandfather kept to his room; but then he began to go up to Di Lucci's again, sitting not out on the terrace anymore but in a back room where Di Lucci sometimes served meals to paying guests. There I would see him sitting when my mother sent me to Di Lucci's on an errand, cloaked in shadows, nursing a glass of wine, a half-filled decanter sitting on the table in front of him. When he came home in the evenings the wine would be heavy on his breath.

My mother never went into the village anymore, not even for Sunday mass. If she stepped out into the street at all it was only to go down

to the stable to feed the animals or to pick the fruit from the olive trees at the back of the garden so she could press the oil out of them for the winter. She no longer went to the fountain in the morning for water but sent me for it before I went to school, or waited till late in the morning when the other women would have come and gone. When she spoke to me now it was only to send me on these errands, to Di Lucci's, to the fountain, but much of the time she hardly seemed to notice my presence, looking at me sometimes as if she was seeing right through me, her eyes glazed over, all the lines of animation and mirth drawn out of her face, the muscles there gone limp and weak. It got so that I could not bear to be around her anymore, the silence filling my head like a loud humming, echoing there until it blocked out all thought and made my body scream with fettered violence.

Meal times were the worst. Heavy and silent, my grandfather sitting with his head bowed over his plate, looking at no one, my mother sitting turned away from him, crosswise, so that her legs were never under the table, sometimes holding her plate in her hand as she ate. The silence broken only by the clink of a fork against a plate and the muffled clenching of teeth and smacking of lips, each sound a violation, unnatural, and each action mired, it seemed, in the strange torpor of an afternoon dream.

On Sundays, now, we no longer shared our dinner with Zia Lucia and Marta. Who had initiated this change I didn't know. Throughout the trials of the previous months, I had not been able to tell what attitude Aunt Lucia had taken towards my mother. Though she seemed in full possession of her faculties, and could move about without the aid of a cane

or a helping hand, she had retreated in her old age into a dignified taciturnity, as if she could be bothered no longer by the common problems of the world. Thus when I saw her now, on the rare occasion when she might have taken a chair into the street to shell her peas there, she treated me no differently than she had in the past, joked with me about my girlfriends at school or sent me into the house to collect a five lire for myself from a jar of coins she kept in her room. But because of this quiet indifference to my family's problems, she gave the impression of possessing great wisdom, and I always waited for the moment when a few words from her lips would set the whole matter straight. But the words never came.

As for Marta, I was grateful that I seldom saw her now. Though somewhere in her forties, Marta had the air of a shy and frivolous schoolgirl. She spoke seldom, and when she did it was always in a high-pitched, almost hysterical burst of words that often seemed nonsensical--in the middle of a conversation she would suddenly break in with an irrelevant comment about how she'd hurt her foot that day when she'd gone to the fountain, or how she'd seen a rat behind her house, and then she would fall silent again, as if ashamed by her sudden outburst. The other women in the village treated her the way they'd treat a simpleton or a child, and seldom paid her any mind. But in her silence Marta would often watch over a scene like a hawk, her eyes shifting from person to person, drinking in every gesture. Once she had come by to borrow some flour from my mother, and then I had noticed her eyes darting to my mother's belly with what seemed like sharp understanding; but a moment later she had come out with one of her strange outbursts--

something about flies coming into the house and falling into her mother's soup--as if she hadn't noticed anything at all.

My own life was becoming increasingly insular; it seemed thick walls were slowly closing up around me, and soon I would be enclosed in sheer hollow darkness, breathing only my own stagnant breath, and dwindling finally to nothing from lack of light and life. Fabrizio I had not seen since the incident on Colle di Papa: from the taunts of the other boys at school, I learned that his father had banished him from his house and hired him out to a *padrona* in Rocca Secca for the olive harvest, because he had abandoned his sheep one day on Colle di Papa and come home battered and bruised from a fight. I never went down into his part of town now, and when I took the sheep out to graze I always avoided the pastures that were near his father's fields. At night, lying in bed, I would remember stories my grandfather had told me about the evil *padroni* of times past, the way they had abused their workers to the point of sickness and starvation, and then Fabrizio's face, grinless now, and gaunt, would haunt my dreams.

At school, the other boys seemed gradually to have grown bored with their teasing; either that or, understanding better than I did the meaning of my mother's loose dresses, which were glimpsed fleetingly but surely by the watching women who sat the long day on their front stoops, they were humbled somewhat by the new gravity of the situation, which exceeded the ken of their boyish cruelty; or perhaps they themselves had begun to fear the veracity of Alfredo's prediction, and thought it best to protect themselves from its eventual fearful fruition by keeping a safe distance from me.

La maestra, though, continued unabated in her attentions to me. 'Vittorio!' she would sing out as I hurried past her in the morning, 'look, your shirt is coming out of your pants.' And she would bend with a smile to tuck it in, while half a dozen other untucked shirts slipped past us to their seats. Perhaps there was an element of vengeance in this new maternal concern, some oblique attack against my mother. But some part of me encouraged her in her attention, for in the space of a few weeks I had become an almost model student--now I took my books home diligently and spent hours studying them by the light of my lamp, was always the first to finish my assignments in class, had even mastered finally the slippery logic of arithmetic, down to the smallest remainders of a long division, so that my tests came back to me with only large red swirls of approval. Now when the teacher assigned seat work she always let me work in peace while she went around to the other students scolding and rapping heads. Then, finally, when I had set my pencil down, she would lean over me, with her garlic and perfume smell, one hand on my shoulder, a heavy breast rubbing against my arm.

'*Benè*, Vittorio, *bravo*!' Then she'd pick up my exercise book and hold it open to the class. 'Vittorio has got every question right.' I, meanwhile, would stare into my desk top, my face flushed with mixed pride and shame.

I still stayed every day after classes to sweep the room, on the teacher's request, and though the threat of violence seemed to have abated I was grateful nonetheless to be spared for half hour or so from returning home, where only a heavy silence awaited me. Sometimes as I swept I'd look up to see the teacher staring at me with her wet-eyed

look of pity, and something inside me would shrivel and grow cold and I'd begin to sweep more furiously, raising clouds of dust that hung like dirty fog in the shafts of light coming through the windows. But the teacher never seemed to notice.

One day as I was scooping up the last remains of the day's dirt, dawdling, despite myself, since I did not want to go home, I noticed the teacher looking over at me several times, pregnantly, some new devilment surging in her.

'That's fine, Vittorio,' she said finally. 'Now come over here, I have something to show you.' I set down my broom and drew towards her desk, keeping the desk safely between the two us. La maestra reached down between her legs and pulled up a chafed leather bag. Out of it she drew a large cloth-bound book.

'*Vieni qui*,' she said, urging me with a motion of her hand to come around beside her. '*Piu vicino*, don't be shy,' and as I came around the desk she reached out and hugged me towards her.

'*Guarda*,' she said, propping the book up on her desk so that the cover was facing us. It read, '*Le vite dei santi*,' this written at the top in bold capitals, then beneath, in smaller italics, '*raccolte e trascritte da Alberto Calvo/adattato al ordine del Calendario Liturgico/con illustrazioni in colore da Giovanni Battista.*' Underneath the title was a glossy colour plate, glued to the book's cover, showing a man in a brown cassock standing in a garden or a courtyard, arm outstretched, two white birds perched on the edges of his fingers and pecking at his palm. A large yellow halo hovered over the man's head.

'San Francesco,' the teacher said. 'He was so gentle that even the

birds came to eat out of his hands.'

'Once in Rocca Secca I saw someone feeding the pigeons like that in front of the church,' I said, forgetting for a moment my silent resistance to the teacher's endearments.

'It's not the same thing,' la maestra said firmly. 'San Francesco was a saint. The birds came to him because he was a man of God. Those pigeons in Rocca Secca are like rats, they only come for the food.'

Now the teacher cracked open the book and began leafing through the pages--they were soiled and thumb-worn, and I guessed that the teacher must have devoted a good deal of study to the lives of the saints. She stopped finally at that day's date, the sixth of November. Here was another colour plate, covered by a sheet of fine white tissue which the teacher lifted aside so that I could see the details of the picture underneath: another haloed man, this one in a forest, with long, golden hair and a thick beard, a wooden staff in his right hand, and one foot resting atop the head of a large green snake whose long body lay coiled and inert in the foreground.

'San Leonardo,' the teacher said, and then she flipped the tissue back and began to read me his tale, though I could see she was paraphrasing for my benefit, because the text contained many long words whose meanings I didn't know. San Leonardo had the strength of a lion, and wrought many miracles; and as the teacher began to relate them--he was known especially for breaking the chains of prisoners who invoked his name in prayer--I hardly noticed that my body was slowly losing its hard vigilance and that I was moving closer into the teacher's warmth, until finally, wrapped in the weaving cadences of her voice, I found

myself pressed up against her hot breast.

'And once when San Leonardo lay on the ground in prayer,' the teacher read, 'a huge serpent came out of the woods and slid up inside his shirt. But the saint, when he saw the serpent sticking its tongue out at his face, did not even get up from his prayer. He waited until he had finished, and then he said to the serpent: "I know that ever since the day you were created you have made as much trouble as you could for men; but now, if God has given you power over me, then do to me whatever I have deserved!". And at these words the serpent jumped out of San Leonardo's shirt and fell at his feet dead.'

So began what became an almost daily ritual over the next few months. After I had finished my sweeping the teacher would call me over to her desk and reach down into her large leather bag, and I would stand beside her as she recounted for me the magical deeds of the saints. And while at home my mother's swelling had begun to bulge against her dresses, to my growing fear, and the silence hung thick and stagnant, the teacher's voice became a sole point of light in a haze of encroaching gloom, and following it I would drift slowly from my own small, choked life into bright air and sky, hover there amidst silver-haired angels and golden-haired saints. Gradually my grudging resistance to la maestra gave way to a vague longing, one which manifested itself as a gentle churning in my stomach and a slight lump in my throat, and whose sole object was escape, no longer vengeance or vindication but simple, sudden flight, a gentle ascent along the wafting rhythms of the teacher's voice until the world below me was a small globe I could hold in the palm of my hand. And as the cadences of that voice filled my head,

the teacher's flesh and blood presence began to seem a strange illusion to me. She had become all voice, and when I listened to her in class my mind would begin to wander and the world would fade away from me, so that it was always a shock when I looked up to see the teacher's strange mountain of flesh, with all its swells and summits, towering over me real and solid and shaking its head indulgently.

"Vittorio, you're such a dreamer," she'd say, while girls tittered behind their hands and boys puffed up their cheeks to restrain their laughter.

But then the classroom would fade away again, even my classmates now very distant and unreal, part of a world where pigeons were like rats and where snakes no longer fell dead at the sound of God's name. And I would wait, patiently, until the teacher called me up to her desk again at the end of the day and pulled her big book out of her leather bag.

La maestra more or less followed the liturgical calendar in these readings, though occasionally she made special excursions to pick out saints that would be of particular interest to me. There were my name saints, for instance: San Victorinus, February the twenty-fifth, a Corinthian who was martyred under Diocletian, and was known for his great fortitude in suffering, for he met his martyrdom, by being first scourged and then pounded to death in a great marble mortar, without so much as a cry or a whimper; San Vittorio I, July the twenty-eighth, a native of Africa and a pope and martyr, who underwent constant persecutions for his energy and zeal, and was the first in Rome to celebrate the mysteries in Latin; San Innocente I, on the same day, from Albano, near Rome, a pope and zealot who was spared, by his timely absence, from

the sack of Rome by the Goths, much as Lot had been spared from Sodom. Then my birthday saint, San Bartolomeo, one of the twelve apostles: after Christ's death and resurrection, Bartolomeo preached the gospel in India and Armenia, and when he had wrought many miracles and converted many people he was flayed alive by the barbarians at Albanopolis, on the Caspian Sea, and by command of the king was finally beheaded, thus fulfilling his martyrdom.

A few days before school let out that year for the Christmas break, la maestra read me the story of Santa Cristina, virgin and martyr. Cristina had been born into the house of a wealthy Roman nobleman, but at a young age she was converted to Christianity by one of her father's slaves and went through her father's house breaking up all the gold and silver images of the pagan gods there, selling the fragments to help the poor. When her father discovered her crime, he beat her without mercy, then brought her before the magistrate for final judgement.

Thus began a long series of chastisements. First the judge ordered Cristina to be thrown into a pit with a hundred venomous serpents; but these Cristina overcame, through the strength of Christ, and she was once again brought before the court. Now her flesh was torn away from her body with large iron hooks; but Cristina, undisturbed, picked up a chunk of her own ravaged flesh and threw it in the magistrate's face. Enraged, he had her tied to a stake to be burnt as a witch, but when a fire was kindled under her it rapidly spread and burnt down a whole block of the city, killing hundreds but leaving Cristina unscathed. That night, while Cristina was locked in a cell awaiting further judgement, the magistrate suffered a seizure and died.

The next day she was brought before a new magistrate. He ordered her put into a tub full of boiling pitch and oil; but though the fire raged beneath the tub, Cristina lay back as calmly as if she were having a warm bath. Now her head was shaved and she was led naked through the city to the temple of Jupiter; but when she reached the temple the image of the god fell headlong into the street and shattered into a thousand fragments, and on seeing this sight the second judge, too, suffered a seizure and died.

Cristina, on the third morning still seeming the flower of youth and beauty, her flesh healed, her hair grown back, was now brought before the third magistrate. Two guards shackled her to a wall and then hacked off her breasts with their swords. But milk, not blood, flowed from the wounds, and Cristina, slipping easily out of her shackles, warned the judge not to persist, for the power of Christ was greater than his own, and he would surely perish. The judge ordered her tongue cut out; but Cristina, still talking freely, picked up her tongue and threw it at the judge's eye, which immediately went blind. Finally, in a fury, and wanting to be finished with this woman's evil and strange powers, the judge ordered Cristina to be cast into the sea. A battalion of a thousand men marched her, naked and manacled, to the port, where she was tied to the prow of a great war ship and rowed out several miles from the harbour, to the deep water. A huge slab of stone was strapped to her naked body with heavy chains--it took a dozen soldiers to lift her up to the ship's rail and thrust her towards the sea. But just as Cristina was about to strike the water, the stone and chains slipped mysteriously from her: for a moment she hovered above the surface of

the sea like a shade, and the sky, seconds before a clear blue, was now eclipsed by a mass of purple clouds, so that what had been day had now become night, with only a single shaft of brilliant light piercing through the darkness, and trained directly on the hovering form of Cristina, now clothed in robes of flowing white. And suddenly the archangel Michael was standing on the still surface of the sea, wings spread large and silver in the shaft of light, and as the soldiers stared wide-eyed with terror from the rails of their paltry barge the angel stooped down to cup a handful of brine and bring it to Cristina's forehead. Then he reached out a hand to her, and the two of them ascended slowly along the shaft of light into the heavens, while below them, on the world's small globe, a great storm was finally unleashed, and the Roman ship and all aboard it were swallowed into the sea.

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XXVI--SILVER BELLS

My mother's greatest crime, I suppose, at least in the eyes of the villagers, was her excessive pride, her apparent lack of contrition for breaking taboos which were sacred and age-old. It wasn't enough that the fruit of her crime daily swelled and ripened inside her--some act of contrition was needed, some sign that her spirit of defiance was broken. Every taboo pitted itself against the force of brute desire, proscribed, in some way, dangerous forces which spawned and festered in the gut of every poor sinner; and when a taboo was broken without shame or
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punishment, desire burst its bounds, and the spores of its bad example spread like a pestilence. Ostracism, then, was really a kind of quarantine, to keep the disease from spreading, and worked by becoming the very punishment for the crime--a punishment which the gods, in their infinite carelessness, might have overlooked.

The men of Valle del Sole had long nursed a simmering misogyny, born, in feudal times, from the long weeks and months they had spent away from home working the landlord's fields, when at night, asleep under the stars, their nightmares had been filled with visions of horns and two-backed beasts. These fears were well-recorded in the village's proverbs--'Guard your women like your chickens, or they will make food for the neighbour's table'; 'If the cock is in the fields, the hen will lay her eggs in another nest'; 'A woman is like a goat: she will eat anything she sees in front of her.' And though for many of the men the long yearly absences of feudal times had passed, there were still enough day labourers in Valle del Sole, who let their wives tend their little plot of land near the village while they sought out daily wages far from home during harvest time, and enough migrant workers who yearly travelled into northern Italy or France or Switzerland for their work, returning only during the summer holidays, and enough men too who were planning one-way journeys across the sea, to leave behind wives and families for perhaps several years, that the fears of woman's perfidy had been kept alive in Valle del Sole; and the proverbs of her evil could still often be heard on the lips of the men there.

It had been the women, though, who had been harshest towards my mother, who had gathered together at the fountain and in dark kitchens to

discuss her fate; who had pronounced judgement, no doubt, decreed her exile and passed on to their children the names and taunts I heard at school; who watched hawk-eyed now from their front stoops for the slow progress of her disease, waiting for it to destroy her. For they were the ones who stood most to lose from my mother's behaviour, in the fodder it supplied for their husbands' fears, the excuse for restricted freedoms, angry words, another drunken beating; and no doubt, in hearing those fears spoken so many times, in their hearts the women had begun to believe them, remembered a glance they had stolen from a stranger in the market, or some flattery from the butcher they had cherished, and so fought with all the fierceness of the archangels against anything that might awaken the evil in their own souls. And the women had their own fears, too, ones more rooted in truth than those of the men, but for which proverbial wisdom provided no sanction--what *man's* perfidy did my mother carry now in her bosom, and what woman had been wronged by it?

By Christmas day of 1956, my mother's state could not have been ambiguous--her loose dresses, now, swelled around her waist, and hung like tents above her shins. This silent swelling was a normal enough sight in Valle del Sole, but connected as it was to a long series of aberrations, and surrounded by the soundless gloom of my grandfather's household, it had become a slow, gathering torment. Without my father's intervention, Alfreddo's prediction was coming to pass, and slowly some unspeakable thing was taking form in my mother's belly, tangible and grave, day by day growing more portentous, until the day it would burst its walls and carry us all to our doom.

But on Christmas day, matters took an unexpected turn. At

breakfast, my grandfather spoke.

'Get dressed,' he said, speaking to my mother. 'You're coming to Mass.'

Only these few words, and then my grandfather rose and went to his room; but these words broke a silence that had lasted almost two months.

My mother was standing at the side counter, using fistfuls of dirt to scrub the pot she would use to cook the day's pasta. Now she stopped her scrubbing, and did not start again until my grandfather's door had clicked shut. 'He's crazy,' she muttered, then began scrubbing with new force, until patches of silver were beginning to show through the years of accumulated soot. Then abruptly she stopped, rinsed her hands quickly in the tub beside her, and crossed the room still drying her hands on her apron.

'Hurry up and get dressed,' she said, passing me at the table, and then she was up the stairs, and the door of her room closed with a thud.

We were each of us behind our separate doors when the church bells began to toll. And toll the bells did, with all the unbridled violence and clarity of a crisp Christmas morning, cracking the air with their peals and echoing against the thin shell of snow which had coated the mountains in the night. Dressed now, I stood at my balcony in the morning's cold brilliance, scuffing the new-fallen snow with my blackened Sunday shoes and waiting for some sign or sound from my mother's room. But when after a few minutes no sign came, I crossed my room and headed past my mother's closed door and down to the kitchen.

For several minutes I stood at the open front door, hands in my pockets, staring out into the street and listening to the tolling of the

bells. The church bells had been made in Rocca Secca, which was famous for its bellworks, and were coated with a layer of pure silver. During the war Father Niccolo's predecessor had kept them blackened with soot, to protect the village's greatest treasure from the acquisitive eye of the Germans; but now, polished to a sheen for Christmas, they glinted brightly in the sun as they swung to and fro in their tower, their substance lending its colour to their sound, silvering the air with its fine, hollow ringing. The peals made me think of great silver birds flying into the sun, and I imagined riding the backs of them into the morning's limpid blue; but no, it would be too cold, especially in my tight Sunday clothes, which let in air at my ankles and wrists. About an inch and a half of blue-veined skin showed between the edges of my palms and the cuffs of my shirt--I usually got a new Sunday shirt for Christmas, but this year I had not.

My grandfather's door opened finally and he emerged in his fedora and baggy black suit; as was his custom on Christmas, he had pinned to the lapel of his jacket his three war medals, the silver and bronze medallions of them freshly polished and glinting, though the ribbons were a little discoloured from age. His shoes, too, were newly brushed, even the high heel of his shorter leg buffed to a lustre.

'That suit is too small for you,' he said as he came up to me. He looked up the staircase towards my mother's closed door, then stared into the street, grimacing at the light. We waited a long moment at the foot of the stairs, the bells tolling now a final series of long, singular gongs that announced the mass would soon be beginning. Finally my grandfather said 'Let's go,' and moved towards the doorway; but a door

upstairs creaked open now, and my mother appeared at the top of the stairwell.

Her dark hair flowed in loose waves over a silky blue shawl she had draped over her shoulders, and she was wearing not one of the wide dresses I had gotten used to seeing her in but a tailored white blouse and a black skirt which fit tight around her waist, so that the swell there rose up like a hill, in all its foreboding gravity. Her face, though, was composed in a look of stern resoluteness, and a gleam of old boldness shone in her eyes.

My grandfather had only looked up momentarily; now he was already out the door. My mother descended the stairs and leaned to kiss me on the forehead; then the two of us stepped into the street after my grandfather, arranging ourselves beside him in order of generation, grandfather, mother, child, three dark forms against the morning's white brilliance. The sun had already begun to melt the night's snow; crystal drops were falling from the eaves of houses, and small jagged icicles had formed on some of the horns that hung above doorways. Further up the street the snow had been turned to slush by the tramping of people on their way to mass. The bells had stopped tolling now, but up ahead some of the villagers were still passing through the square towards the church steps. When we had walked a ways a door creaked open behind us and a sudden babble of family noises broke the morning stillness, a baby's cry, a mother reprimanding a child, a husband cursing under his breath. The Mastroangelos, as usual late for mass. As they came up behind us, though, quickly overtaking us because of my grandfather's slow pace, their voices went suddenly quiet. They made a small arc,

around us, eyes averted, and mumbled holiday greetings as they passed, which my grandfather returned with a stiff formality.

We would be the last to arrive. The church would be full today, the congregants reaching back into the little square beyond the entrance, but a few places would have been left free in the front pew for my grandfather; no one had thought to strip him of that privilege yet. In a few minutes the Mastroangelos, too, had disappeared up the church steps, and we were left alone in the deserted street, our legs straining silently against the street's slope.

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XXVII--TO ERR IS HUMAN

Frederick the Great, when told by his minions that a bill denouncing him had been posted on the city walls, had exclaimed 'Hang it higher!'; perhaps my mother had had in mind something in this tradition when full-bellied and without shame she appeared at mass on the feast of the virgin birth. But whatever her intentions, she did not have much control over the way her gesture was interpreted--she had simply written a character in the air, and those who looked on it were happy enough to give it the meaning that suited them. Because ostracism, when it came down to it, like anything else that had to be systematic and consistent, was work, and perhaps the people of Valle del Sole were beginning to grow tired with the monotony of it. They only awaited the moment when they could say with confidence that the axe had fallen, the gods had acted,
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and there was no need anymore for human agencies to do the work of the deities; then with relief they could drop their god-like rectitude and flock to the sinner like comforters to Job. In my mother's case, it was some sign of repentance and guilt the villagers wanted, since guilt was always the point at which God was most manifest.

In our own household, very few words were spoken over our Christmas dinner. Aunt Lucia and Marta had joined us again, after an absence of some two months from our kitchen, but they did little to enliven the conversation. My aunt made a joke about Father Nick's sermon which brought a smile to my mother's lips--'You'd think from the way he spoke he'd been one of the wise men himself,' she said, 'but I remember after the war, when he first came here, he wouldn't give a single lire of the church's money to help those who had been left with nothing.' (The sermon had been on the spirit of giving, with the three wise men as example; though all in the church had no doubt noticed the long, self-satisfied glances Father Nick had cast at my mother during the service, and marvelled at his restraint in not switching his sermon extempore to the theme of the lost sheep.) But my grandfather grimaced at this statement as if personally offended, and my mother said nothing.

Later, my grandfather complained that the sauce was flat.

'I ran out of salt,' my mother said. 'I'll send Vittorio to get some from Di Lucci.'

'I'm sure Di Lucci is having his dinner like everyone else,' my grandfather said. 'Let him eat in peace.'

But in other kitchens across the village, no doubt, more heated discussions were in progress. It may have been the men who, sitting down

to their meals and responding to some sarcastic remark from their wives, put forward an almost casual appeal for mercy, feeling now in the largesse of their souls the freedom to be amused and disinterested. For though they disapproved of my mother's crime, they had grown tired by now of the hushed silences and the averted eyes, and felt that in a short life they could not afford these little hard spots in their hearts, especially when it was much nicer to have a laugh over a glass of wine and let God worry about other people's sins. And though in making their appeal they might, to give it substance, have invoked an old allegiance to *lu podestà*, long a pillar of the community, no doubt they took a certain pleasure now in being able to show pity to a man who before they were bound to in respect, and took pleasure too in seeing another man wronged by the sins of his wife, because there was always something in the misfortune of others which made oneself feel somehow invulnerable and strong.

But maybe the women, too, had softened, in seeing my mother arrive at mass big-bellied with her sins, since a public announcement of this sort was a much different thing than information gleaned by stolen glimpses and hearsay, and called not for punishment but pity. For though my mother had long walked about the village with the air of a princess, she had always treated others with good humour and respect, and if pride now would not allow her to drop her airs completely it was still easy to see how weary she had become with the burden of her crimes. And though she had brought shame not only on herself but on all the women of the village, still the hearts of the women could not help but go out to her in sympathy, for there was always something in the

misfortune of others which made one realize that oneself, too, was vulnerable, and weak.

But however it came about, at least some of the households in Valle del Sole reached a consensus over their Christmas dinner, and were prepared to accept my mother's appearance in church as the sign of contrition they had awaited. Certainly there would be a faction that held out, headed no doubt by Maria Maiale, and for months afterwards dark kitchens would resound with accusation and recrimination. But for the moment, at least, some of the villagers had come to a decision, and if it occurred to any of them that my mother had come to church not in repentance but defiance, they appeared willing to overlook that fact--in matters of conscience, at any rate, it was more the outward form of a thing than the inner content that mattered. What my mother thought was her own business; but the people had to have a sign.

We had just finished eating when the outcome of these deliberations began to affect us. A knock on the door caught us all by surprise, Marta's nervous eyes darting to the door with a look of shock and wild-eyed curiosity, my mother stopping as she crossed the floor, a stack of dirty dishes in her hands, and then moving too quickly towards the counter, my grandfather turning around too suddenly to poke at the fire behind him with his cane. Only Zia Lucia retained her calm, and said, 'Go on, Vittorio, answer the door.'

A minute later Giuseppina, her husband Alberto, and their three children were huddled in a close group inside the doorway, reeking of winter air and looking stiff and formal in their Christmas clothing. Almost in unison they uttered a forced 'Buon Natale!', Giuseppina's

daughter Angelina, around nine, already echoing her mother's nasal whine, and then Giuseppina moved awkwardly towards the centre of the room, pulling a white cloth off a tray she held in the crook of an arm and offering the tray to my mother.

'I brought you some pastries,' she said. 'You probably didn't have time to make any yourself.'

She had brought a tray of *ostie*, one of the usual holiday treats in Valle del Sole, consisting of two paper-thin wafers that looked like huge communion hosts--and by themselves were as tasteless--sandwiching a thick layer of honey and chopped almonds. Every family in Valle del Sole had a special set of irons for making their *ostie*, and another for their *cangelle*, diamond-shaped waffles made from rich yellow dough. The irons, long-handled things that opened up like huge nutcrackers, were made up individually by the blacksmith in Rocca Secca, and had the family's surname or initial carved into the plates so that it came out in relief in the centre of each pastry. Every Christmas and Easter I helped my mother as she minted her holiday pastries over the kitchen fire; but this Christmas the blackened irons had sat in their corner of the kitchen untouched.

'*Grazie*,' my mother said now, but she didn't reach out to take a host from the tray. 'Why don't you offer some to the children.'

This suggestion met with immediate approval from Giuseppina's smaller charges, a pudgy boy around five and a tiny pony-tailed girl around three and a half, and as their mother set the tray on the edge of the kitchen table they dove for it and made their catch, then hung protectively around their mother's skirts. Angelina, tall and gangly,

clutched a host to her breast and moved to a chair against a side wall, making a face at me as she passed.

Giuseppina's husband still hovered near the doorway, cap in hand.

'Come in and sit down,' my grandfather said gruffly. 'Cristina, get a glass for Alberto.'

'It's so nice what Father Niccolo did with the church this year,' Giuseppina was saying. 'The three wise men and all the little animals and the little baby Jesus. I went up to look at it after the service and even the diaper was made of real silk. Silk diapers! The whole thing must have cost a fortune.'

'You paid for it,' my mother said.

'You looked very nice at the service,' Giuseppina started, but there was another knock at the door, and now Di Lucci burst in with his wife and younger son--he always left the older one at home on Christmas, to tend to the shop--and gave out a hearty 'Buon Natale!' to everyone present, then all smiles came into the room and plunked a bottle of brandy on the table.

'*Bicchieri*, Cristina! Glasses for everyone. A Christmas toast!' And he immediately helped himself to one of the *ostie*.

'Sit down, Andō,' my grandfather said. 'Cristī, bring us some more glasses.'

And so our home, which for months had known only a lenten silence, was once again filled with a little life and loud conversation, a bit awkward and forced at first, but as other visitors stopped by--the Mastronardis, the Di Mennas, the Ingrattas, the Catalones--and the brandy and wine and *amaretto* flowed, something like genuine ease and

geniality began to show itself in the voices and gestures of our guests. Soon the tray of *ostie* was empty, everyone taking a ritual one as they entered the house, to be replaced by a plateful of *cangelle*, a bowl of *torcine* (another local specialty: odd-shaped pastries coated in sugar, made by dropping large gobs of sweet dough into a pot of boiling oil), a *pizza grandigne*, more *ostie*. Half a dozen conversations buzzed at once, and if you'd tried to chart the pattern of them you would have ended up with a hopeless tangle of crossed lines and mixed connections, conversations spreading by a process of association, so that a half sentence from one speaker would spark a different thought in each of three or four listeners, who would immediately turn to whoever was standing beside them and carry on that thought without missing a beat, borne on by some grand rhythm which somehow prevented all this swelling chatter from deteriorating into mere chaos. Children raced through the room laughing and screeching, stomping each other's *cangelle* into the floor, weaving in and out of the pockets of empty space in the room like flies; little babies in their mothers' arms cried just loud enough to be heard above the din of conversation, until a mother would interrupt herself suddenly to cry, 'Oh, *basta*!' at the child's screwed up face, and the child would retreat into a whimpering silence, only to regroup its forces and take up its cry again a few minutes later. A stranger, wandering down from the high road and stopping in at the door to ask directions, could only have thought that all was well in this household, that good peasant people, salt of the earth, hands hard from a long year's work in the fields, had got together for a day of holiday cheer; and, noticing after a moment a pretty woman's

swollen belly, he might have smiled to himself: here was the work of generation, of blood begetting blood as had been done since time immemorial, an act as natural as the sprouting of wheat in spring. That quiet boy in the corner is surely the woman's son--they have the same dark pools for eyes. But who in all these is the father?

I, meanwhile, no stranger, stared out from my dark pools for eyes, sitting in a corner on a rickety chair which no one had forced me to give up for one of the guests, and which not even the other children attempted to slide themselves into whenever I made a quick foray to the kitchen table for another sweet. My eyes shifted around the room, looking for the loose thread by which this once familiar tapestry might again come undone. My grandfather was still sitting in his chair by the fire, occasionally turning around to stoke it and throw in another piece of wood, though the heat from the bodies in the room would have been enough to keep us all warm. Men came up and clapped their hands on his shoulder, but when I tried to remember the way my grandfather used to hold his body, the way he used to talk, the gestures he used to make, to imagine what he had looked like when he had sat on Di Lucci's terrace playing *tre sette* or telling stories, I got only the one image of when I'd passed by Di Lucci's and seen him sitting up there staring into space like an old man, all the life gone out of him. Now, once in a while, he made a contribution to the conversation or cracked a little joke, but his voice was dry and humourless. Once he made a feeble attempt to draw Giuseppina's little girl against his knee, but the girl shied away from him, and he quickly dropped the arm he'd tried to slip around her waist.

And my mother--she could have been almost invisible in this rabble if people hadn't had to keep making way for her swollen belly as she moved around the room offering pastries and filling glasses. Sometimes one of the women would direct a comment at her and my mother might say a few short words in reply, or simply stretch her lips into what looked like a tired smile; but mainly she avoided conversation, busying herself much more than she ever had in the past with the role of hostess, moving through the room like a shade with her trays of pastries, then retreating for a long time to the side counter, where she rinsed out dirty glasses to distribute them to newcomers. From where I sat I could see her in profile as she stood over the counter, her back to the room, rinsing the glasses with restrained violence; but when she turned back to the crowd again her face was calm and without expression.

But as twilight began to descend, the light from the fire casting long flickering shadows across the room, the crowd began to thin. Soon the last guests had left, taking their laughter and loud conversation with them, as if we had had it only on temporary loan. The kitchen suddenly had the same air of desolation as the village square after la Festa: left now only the clutter of scattered chairs and dirty glasses and empty bottles, the crumbs of *cangelle* and *ostie* on the floor, and quickly the room reverted to its familiar heavy silence. I helped my mother clean while my grandfather stared into the fire, smacking his lips and spitting occasionally as if he had just bitten into something bitter.

My mother and I set the table for a supper of *prosciutto* and bread. The lamp that hung above the table had been lit, but its dull

light did not seem to penetrate the room's growing darkness. My mother poured a glass of wine for her father but he didn't turn away from the fire, just reached around with one hand and took up the glass, then brought it to his lips and took a long draught. All afternoon he had been downing small glasses of wine and brandy in quick gulps. My mother looked over at him but he kept staring into the fire. Then finally, without turning, he spoke.

'They came here,' he said, his voice trembling, 'to laugh at us.'

A pause. My mother bit down on a piece of bread, chewed, swallowed.

'They're idiots,' she said finally, bitterly. 'It was only for your sake that I didn't chase them out of here with a whip.'

My grandfather wheeled around suddenly and slammed his glass onto the table, hard.

'Who in *hell* do you think you are? For *my* sake! Was it for my sake you brought this disgrace on me? You sit there like a whore and talk as if you're better than those people? *They* are my people, not you, not someone who could do what you've done! I've suffered every day of my life, *per l'amore di Cristo*, but I've never had to walk through this town and hang my head in shame. Now people come to my house like they go to a circus, to laugh at the clowns! You've killed me Cristina, you killed your mother when you were born and now you've killed me, as surely as if you'd pulled a knife across my throat. In all my days I've never raised a hand against you but now I wish to God I'd locked you in the stable and raised you with the pigs, that you'd died and rotted in the womb, that you had not lived long enough to bring this disgrace on my name!'

The air rang now with my grandfather's curses; it seemed that all the silence of the past few months had suddenly burst and spilled its awful contents. But my mother sat still and silent, and made no attempt to move or speak as my grandfather got up from his chair, grabbed his cane, and set off at an agitated pace towards his room. Behind me I heard his shoes and cane clacking against the floor, heard the latch of his door turning, the hinges creak, the door slam shut; but still my mother sat unmoving in her seat, staring into her plate.

But only seconds after my grandfather had slammed his door shut, the silence was shattered again, this time by a succession of muddled sounds--splintering wood, a thud, a cry of pain. My mother sprang up from her chair and rushed to my grandfather's door, but when she tried to open it, it caught against something and we heard another moan of pain. Through the slit that opened up we could see my grandfather stretched out awkwardly on the stone floor, his bedroom table, the angles of its legs distorted, fallen on top of him.

'My leg,' he said, his voice tight with pain. The fallen table blocked his face from view. One of his legs was bent forward at the knee but the other stretched up to the door, blocking it. My mother got down on her knees and reached her hand inside the room, taking hold of his shin in an effort to move the leg aside, but when she tried to do so my grandfather let out another cry of pain.

My mother got up and stood for a moment undecided, her eyes wildly searching the room. They alighted finally on the axe by the wood pile. In a moment she was wheeling back across the room axe in hand.

'Stand back, Vittorio,' she said, and then, after clicking the door

shut again, she started in on her first swing, bringing the axe hard against the door frame, prying away at the bottom hinge. The wood splintered with a sharp crack as the axe bit into it, and my mother wound back and swung again.

'Go get Di Lucci,' she said to me. 'And tell him to bring the rack from the church. We'll need it to carry him.'

But I stood frozen for a moment, awed by the force of my mother's swings--she nearly had the bottom hinge free--until finally she turned to me and shouted, '*Sbrigati, per l'amore di Cristo!*' and in a flash I was out the door and running once again up to Di Lucci's bar.

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XXVIII--A COLD WINTER'S NIGHT

My mother had managed to axe the door off its hinges and slide it out of the way by the time I arrived with help. But the scene that followed was sheer madness. By the end of it half the village stood in our kitchen and in the street in front of the house, men, women, and children, everyone shouting 'Stand back!' and 'Make room!' while crowding in further for a better view. Father Niccolo--Di Lucci had had to go to him to get the rack--stood next to my mother and me at the doorway to my grandfather's room, wringing his hands, looking like a dark angel in his black cassock and wide-brimmed cleric's hat, while inside the room several large men fumbled in the tight spaces between furniture and my grandfather's sprawled form, trying to find the most efficient way to lift him onto the rack. No one knew the least thing about first aid or broken bones besides my grandfather, but he lay on the ground by now delirious with pain, moaning and gritting his teeth and letting out sharp cries every time someone tried to move him.

When the men had finally got him onto the rack and had carried him through the crowded kitchen into the street, where a few fat flakes of snow had started to fall, they realized there would be no way of getting him into Di Lucci's car in his present state. They set him down in the street and began to debate the possibility of strapping the rack to the car's roof, while others suggested smashing out the back and front windshields and sliding the rack through them, a suggestion which Di Lucci greeted with horror. Father Nick stood by with a look of forced calmness and wisdom on his face, though he offered no suggestions of his

own. He did suggest, however, that I run inside and get some blankets to protect my grandfather from the snow and cold, a measure which had been overlooked in the confusion.

But my mother, who had disappeared momentarily, seemed already to have anticipated the problem with transportation, for when I arrived outside again with the blankets she was coming down the street with Mastroangelo's donkey and cart.

'At this rate you'll be here all night,' she said as she pulled up in front of the house. 'Hurry up and load him onto the cart. There's no other way. Has anyone thought to cover him?' Then seeing me standing with the blankets still in my hands, she took them quickly and draped them over my grandfather's anguished form.

'These won't be enough,' she said to me, but Giuseppina had moved inside now to get more. 'And bring a lantern,' my mother called out after her.

'*Ma*, Cristina,' Di Lucci said, coming up to my mother, 'it'll take you half the night to get him to Rocca Secca on that cart. In this weather.' It had begun to snow in earnest now.

'Do you have any other suggestions?'

'Well, at least I could drive in and get someone to come out in the ambulance.'

'On Christmas night?' my mother said. 'It'll be weeks before they send anyone out here. But go ahead and try, and pay them whatever they ask for, I'll give it back to you. In the meantime, I'll start out on my own.'

She motioned some of the men now to load my grandfather into the

cart, while Di Lucci got into his car and sped off into the snow. My grandfather was still moaning with pain, hardly conscious of the crowd around him. 'Leave me in peace,' he muttered as the men lifted him onto the cart. Father Nick made a quick sign of the cross with one finger.

Several men stepped forward now to offer to lead the cart into Rocca Secca.

'Go back to your suppers,' my mother said, taking some blankets and a lantern from Giuseppina. She draped one of the blankets over her own shoulders and the others over my grandfather. 'I can manage on my own. There'll be someone at the hospital to help me carry him.'

'Don't be foolish,' Mastroangelo said, fearful perhaps of leaving his donkey and cart in my mother's care. 'A woman shouldn't be on these roads alone at night. The woods are full of thieves. And in your condition--'

'I can take care of myself,' my mother said quickly, coming over to me. She bent to kiss me on the cheek. 'Go to sleep, Vittorio. Your grandfather will be all right. I'll be back in the morning.'

But as she walked back towards the cart, several men still hovering hesitantly around it, Father Nick called out suddenly, 'Wait, Cristina.'

My mother turned.

'Yes?'

'I'll come with you,' Father Nick said. 'Thieves won't harm a priest.'

'You?' my mother said, eyebrows raised. She paused. 'All right, then, let's go. The walk will do you good. Your belly is starting to stick out a little.'

There were a few muffled laughs, quickly suppressed. Father Nick blushed and hesitated a moment, but then he pulled up his skirts and walked quickly towards the cart.

'I'll take the reins,' he said, suddenly stern. 'You keep the snow off your father.'

'As you wish,' my mother said.

So they set off, a priest, a pregnant woman, and a shattered old man. My mother had been right--Di Lucci was not able to get an ambulance in Rocca Secca, for the hospital's only one was in the garage, and would not be repaired until after the new year. They made the whole trek on foot, a journey of several hours, and what my mother and Father Nick talked about during that time no one knew but themselves, though certainly speculations on the matter generated conversations in Valle del Sole for many months to come. As the two of them moved towards the highroad now, those of us left behind could hear only the creak of the cart's wheels, the occasional snort of the donkey, and my grandfather's soft moans, though even these sounds were soon muffled by the hush of falling snow. Father Nick, black on black, quickly melted into the night; but for a long while we could still make out the haloed haze of my mother's lantern. Then this too was bleached out by the snow, which was growing thicker now, and the people gathered in front of our house moved quietly back to unfinished meals, warm fires, and home.

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XXIX--LETTERS FROM ABROAD

My grandfather had broken a leg--the same one a horse had stepped on during the war--and fractured his hip. His bones must have been so dry and brittle that the least pressure had been enough to snap them. He stayed in the hospital for almost a month, and even then it was probably only because his bed was needed that he was sent home.

My mother took me to see him once or twice a week. He had been placed in a ward full of old men with pasty, wrinkled skin and rotten teeth and bony arms that lay limp and blue-veined above the sheets of their beds, sticking out of the baggy short sleeves of hospital gowns like dead branches. My grandfather lay with one leg wrapped in thick plaster and suspended from a system of bars and cables and pulleys set up over his bed; but apart from this distinction, he did not look much different from the men around him, had the same pale cast over his face, the same thin arms, the same look of glazed indifference. Pink circles surrounded his eyes, as if the skin there was raw from crying--he had gotten some kind of eye infection, my mother told me.

My mother also told me they were giving him drugs for the pain--that was why he only mumbled incoherently when we went to see him, sometimes hardly aware of our presence. He seldom looked at my mother and usually only grunted when she asked him a question, so often the two of us sat near his bed for an hour or more without saying a word, my mother staring blankly into space while I fidgeted in my chair. Once he called me by name, and my mother motioned me to stand beside him; when I did so he stretched his thin fingers towards me, and I understood that he wanted

me to give him my hand. He squeezed the hand tight, half-smiling, staring out at me through his wet, pink-ringed eyes.

'Vittorio,' he said dreamily; but he seemed to be staring right through me, and my hand itched for the moment when he would loosen his grasp.

Once the doctor came in on his rounds, the same doctor who had tended to my mother's snake bite, still looking refined and immaculate in his thin-framed spectacles and long white doctor's coat. He greeted my mother with great courtesy, but his eye went down to her belly with a little gleam, as if he shared some secret with her about the bulge there.

'You've been feeling well I hope?' he said, in his burnished Italian. 'No recurrence of the problem you had in the fall?'

But my mother quickly took him aside to speak about my grandfather.

'Is it necessary to keep feeding him those drugs? Look at him, he hardly recognizes us. You'd never know I was his daughter.'

The doctor pursed his lips, as if suppressing a smile.

'The bone in his leg shattered like glass,' he said. 'I don't think it was in very good shape to begin with, but now.... At any rate, it seems there may still be some bone fragments floating around in there--we tried our best to get them out, but the equipment here is very crude, you understand. Perhaps with time some protective tissue will form around them but now, you see, the slightest movement can bring him great pain. And that is not even mentioning his hip--'

'He's had to deal with pain all his life,' my mother said. 'I'd rather see him in pain than like this.'

'Maybe that's a little selfish of you,' the doctor said.

Meanwhile, my mother had other problems to deal with. Letters had been arriving almost daily from America, Silvio the postman handing them to my mother each morning with a sheepish shrug, each of them bearing the unmistakable scrawl of my father's hand. These letters would leave my mother in a state--she'd tear them open and read them quickly through, standing, muttering to herself, her jaw tensed, her eyes on fire; then she'd crumple them in rage and fling them into the fireplace, where I could make out, just before the thin paper caught a lick of breakfast fire and burst into flames, my father's violent script.

The inevitable had happened--someone had poured some poison in my father's ear. The only surprising thing was that it had taken so long: surely the whispers and glances had been following him already for several months as he pursued his moody, mysterious life across the sea, rumours from the old country no doubt circulating as quickly there as rumours from America did in the streets of Valle del Sole, especially since there had been several departures from Valle del Sole for America since the beginning of my mother's troubles; and his own family, only a few miles distant in Castilucci, had surely known of the matter almost since the beginning, as Alfreddo Pannunzio had known, though we had had no contact with them since early summer. And then, once he had gone so long without learning of my mother's situation, once it had been proved that facts so close to his own concerns could be known by everyone around him without once penetrating whatever thin wall cut him off from the rest of the world, what small, crucial act had finally pierced the wall--a slender letter from a concerned sibling dropped into a mailbox

among all the rest, bearing the usual postage, written in the usual ink; some word dropped carelessly by someone just come from the old country, and ignorant of my father's ignorance; an evening visit from a friend, who came cap in hand and sat in the glaring electric light of his renovated chicken coop to slowly peel back the soft skin of a fear and show him the ugly sore that festered beneath.

But by whatever means, the skin had been broken, and now my father let forth a fury of letters, each of them arriving like harbingers of doom as my mother and I sat down each morning to our *caffelatte*. At first my mother responded to these letters, dispatching me with angry regularity to the letter-box up at Di Lucci's; but after a few weeks she ceased even to open them, letting them collect in a pile on the writing table in her room. 'He's crazy,' she would say when Silvio knocked on the door with another one, and then she'd walk up to her room and set it atop the growing pile, so that day by day the pile seemed to grow more menacing, as if the spirit of my father's rage was somehow trapped within the letters there, and soon would grow into a thing unmanageable. Late at night, though, I would sometimes hear my mother scribbling at her writing table; but these letters I never saw, and the next morning she would be up early and gone to Rocca Secca, on what missions I did not know.

It was only when my grandfather returned home that I began to get some sense of what debates had been raging between my father and my mother. My grandfather was carried home in the back of the mail truck--the ambulance had remained out of service--his leg still in a cast and his hip wound round with wide bandages. He spoke coherently now,

cursing loudly at each jolt as a few of the neighbours carried him into his room and set him down in his bed, but it would be a few months, my mother told me, before the cast would come off and he could walk again. Now, then, we had to put up with his constant presence, his groans and curses every time he shifted in his bed, his sudden ejaculations when he would work himself into a rage over his condition.

'I'll rot in this bed!' he would shout out with a groan. 'I'll die and rot here, you might just as well have put me straight into the grave!'

His face now was skewed into a permanent grimace, and it frightened me to go in and speak to him because of this surly look, and because the raw pink of infection still ringed his eyes. My mother, though, was often at his bedside, bringing him coffee and meals--the village carpenter had made up a wooden tray on a stand to slide over the bed--and helping him to wash himself in the mornings. And since he was completely bedridden, could hardly move a few inches without pain, she had also to tend to his more private functions. A long plastic tube led down from his groin to a sack attached to his leg, and this sack my mother cleaned out regularly, whenever it became thick and heavy with dark yellow fluid. And then once every two days or so my grandfather would call his daughter into his room with a half angry, half embarrassed shout, and she would close the door behind her and come out several minutes later with a pile of white linen in a basin.

'Like a baby!' my grandfather would rumble. 'Sixty-five years old and my daughter has to change my diapers! It's a disgrace!'

But there was something comforting in the curses that now filled our

home, as if after much threatening a dam had finally burst, to let forth not a ruinous flood but merely a strong current, one which with stiff legs and the help of a handhold could be borne. And the handhold which I clutched was my mother's own refound voice, which engaged my grandfather's now in almost ceaseless banter, the subject of which, it seemed, was my father's letters. Long arguments were carried on between kitchen and bedroom while my mother prepared a meal or baked her bread or had her supper, tensions hovering around a critical point but never seeming to move beyond it, the discussions finally petering out into a resigned silence much different in quality from the silence of the past months, more the calm after a storm than the one before it.

'He's crazy!' my mother would shout. 'He doesn't know what he wants. One day he says he's going to come back and wring my neck, the next that he wants nothing more to do with me, the next that he wants me on the next boat over there, so he can tie me to a pole and keep me locked up like a dog. He even went and made the papers--as if I'm going to travel half way around the world in my condition. And then to put up with the same idiocy over there that I had to put up with here!'

'*Sei scimunita*, Christ!' Idiocy! Who's the idiot? You're lucky if he doesn't crack your skull and throw you in the streets!'

My mother: 'Then to hell with all of you! I'll go to Rome, Naples, anywhere--'

'Ah, *bello, come 'na zingara*! And what will you live on, the few thousand lire you've saved from what he sends you? Because you'll not see one *centesimo* of my money. I'll rot in the grave before I do that. And with two children to take care of, you can work in the

streets. *Disgraziata!*'

'Ah, *sì*, for me it's a disgrace! He's probably slept with every whore in America by now. Women have had their faces up their asses for too long. They let their men run around like goats, and then they're happy if they don't come home and beat them!'

'*Brava*, Christina, and you, *comunista*, are going to change all that, by acting like a whore yourself! With your communist boyfriend, who is nothing more than a beggar and a thief, and a foreigner on top of everything! Ah, yes, I know all about him, you think that everyone is ignorant and blind. And you dared to bring him under my own roof--if I had seen him I would have strangled him with my own hands. Where is he now, your communist boyfriend? Go! Go! To Rome, to America, to the devil for all I care! Get out of my sight and let me die in peace! I'll sell the house to some rich Roman for a summer house, or I'll burn it to the ground, and I'll feed the fire with my own bones, and all the bones of my fathers who worked to build it!'

I listened to these conversations wavering between confusion and fear, trying to piece together amidst the curses some plot or narrative I could hang the future on--my dark-haired father looming suddenly large and violent in our doorway one day; my mother and I chained to posts outside some chicken coop across the sea, like dogs. But there was something in the sheer force of my mother's anger which gave me confidence that everything would work out--engraved in my mind now was an image of her swinging our axe the night my grandfather had fallen, and that image made me feel secure, as if my mother's own violence was enough to combat any that might be directed against her. And eventually

I managed to gather from the regular arguments between my mother and grandfather that for the time being, at least, we would be troubled neither by arrivals nor departures--my mother had begun opening her letters again, and it seemed my father had ordered her now to have her child in Valle del Sole and give it up to an orphanage. My mother greeted this idea with her usual angry defiance--'He thinks things are the same as they used to be a hundred years ago,' she said, 'when women used to dump their babies at the back door of the convent in the middle of the night, and leave them there to die from the cold. Let him carry a baby for nine months and see if he feels that way.' But secretly--siding in this case with my grandfather, who declared he would not have 'that bastard child' under his roof, which I took to mean that he was as aware of the dangers of birth as I was--I saw in this suggestion the possibility of our salvation, for things would return to the way they had been before, and the orphanage, which was probably better equipped to deal with such things, would relieve us of my snake-headed sibling.

Visitors came to our house now occasionally, and whatever mixed intentions they came with, to pay their respects to my grandfather or to glean some further morsel of gossip, they retained a respectful attitude while in the house, occasionally cutting through my grandfather's crusty formality to a little humour, accepting sweets and glasses of wine from my mother with grace, keeping their eyes away from the thing that was uppermost in their minds, my mother's swollen belly. But outside the house I would sometimes catch a few snatches of conversation at the fountain or at Di Lucci's, before I was noticed.

'*Quella Maria!*' I heard Maria Maiale say once at Di Lucci's.

'Maybe it's a virgin child.'

Laughter, Di Lucci's louder than the rest.

Letizia Girasole: 'I think it's the other Mary you're thinking about--Magdelena.'

More laughter.

'Oh, *dio*! Well, it serves her right. Her husband wants to bring her to America. I heard her and the old man shouting about it a few days ago when I passed by the house. She doesn't want to go.'

'I don't blame her. He'll crack her skull, you remember what he was like, just like his father. Then she'll see how good she's had it here.... Oh, look, here's little Vittorio!'

But it was not only my mother now who was the subject of cryptic conversations--my grandfather too, it seemed, was implicated in plots too thick for my small understanding.

'You see how he paid for it in the end? He was the first one to take them in when they came. Roads, he said! Lights! *Viva il Duce*! The communists will eat us alive! But where are the roads now? Where are the lights? He sold us to the devil for fifty lire, and because the people are like sheep it's taken them twenty years to open their eyes.'

So had my grandfather, too, committed some heinous crime? And yet it seemed inevitable that he had, for in the picture of the world that was now taking shape in my head, to replace one of sunny days and light and indolence, one that I could hardly remember, it seemed natural that those close to me should harbour dark secrets that people whispered about at fountains and in bars, as if the bright surface of the world

had cracked, and only through the dark fissures could I glimpse the truth of things. But even this broken world I was willing to accept now, was willing to resign myself to the normalcy of it, if only the cracks would not widen, and the centre would hold.

Then one day towards the end of February another letter arrived for my mother. She snatched it quickly from Silvio, who regarded it curiously before handing it to her, and then she rushed up to her room and closed her door, leaving her breakfast unfinished on the table. I had seen a brief flash of the envelope's face, the script tight and small and bright blue--not my father's, but some hand I had seen before, though I could not remember where.

When I came home from school that day I found my mother packing some clothes into a hamper in her room.

'I'm going to Rome for a few days,' she said. 'I'm leaving early tomorrow morning. Marta will come by to look after you and your grandfather.'

I watched her in silence for a moment.

'I don't want Marta to come,' I said finally.

'Please, Vittorio, don't start. I have some very important business to look after.'

'Why?'

'Just because, that's why. I'll be back in a few days.'

Supper that evening was more subdued than usual. The snippets of conversation I overheard between my mother and my grandfather took place not when they were in separate rooms but when my mother had gone in to bring him his food or clear away his dishes, and were marked now by a

tone of reconciliation, or resignation.

'If you ask me he's as foolish as you are,' my grandfather said once. 'You should have waited till after. What will you do with the child?'

'We'll settle that,' my mother said. Her words were curiously devoid of feeling, as if they were not her own but dead things that had dropped unbidden from her mouth. 'This is the best way for everyone.'

A pause.

'I spoke to Zia Lucia,' my mother said, in the same dead tone. 'Everything is arranged. But I don't want you to say anything to anyone else until I get back.'

'What difference will it make? Now you think about keeping secrets. You should have thought of that months ago. I should have sent you away.'

'It would have been the same,' my mother said. 'Everyone would have known.'

'No,' my grandfather said, anger creeping into his voice. 'That is where you are stupid, Cristina. You carry your shame in the streets. What you've done, you've done, and may God forgive you for it, but that is not the way to be with people.'

'Please, don't start again.'

Later that night, lying in bed, I heard the scratches of my mother's pen again, and thought about the strange letter that had arrived that morning, that seemed to have led to this sudden trip to Rome. I crawled out of bed and walked barefooted to my mother's room. She was sitting at her writing table; as I came into her doorway she slid a piece of

paper into the table's drawer.

'What is it?' she said, annoyed. 'You should be in bed.'

'Why do you have to go to Rome?' I said.

She took in a breath in irritation, but then suddenly her anger seemed to melt, and she motioned me towards her, turning away from her table so I could nestle against her knees.

'Vittorio,' she said, putting her hands on my shoulder, her eyes turning wet. '*Povero* Vittorio, no one ever tells him anything. Oh, iglio mio, what a trial this must be for you. I hope when you're older you won't judge me too harshly, because many things are going to happen now that you won't understand. Do you promise you'll always love me, no matter what happens?'

I nodded. She hugged me towards her, her tears flowing freely now.

'I'll tell you, but you mustn't say anything to anyone,' she said, her voice choked with tears. 'Promise?'

'Yes,' I whispered, my own throat clogging.

She leaned back and stared down at me through wet eyes.

'In a few weeks, Vittorio,' she said finally, 'we're going to leave Valle del Sole. In a few weeks, we're going to America.'

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XXX--AMERICA

America. How many dreams and fears and contradictions were tied up in that single word, a word which conjured up a world, like a name uttered at the dawn of creation, while it broke another, the one of village and home and family, which had been centuries in the making. It was no use saying that the peasants of Valle del Sole, or their counterparts in villages spread throughout the south, emigrated out of sheer necessity--for every one that left there were three or five or ten who stayed behind, and if the land held out to them yearly only the same closed fist, still they bore up under their hardships. So it came, finally, to a matter of choice, one based, as most were, on limited knowledge, but one in which contingencies and options were duly weighed--whether the drought would ruin the year's crop, or a patch of land bring a sufficient price to buy a passage; whether to strike out for the cities of the north, with the promise at least of a yearly return home, or to reckon on an absence of years or a lifetime, and cross the sea. And where there was choice there was also desire, with all its ambiguities, geography becoming the scene of ancient conflicts, the voyage out at once a separation from the mother, from her comfortable enclosed world of village and home, her special language and familiar songs, her constant, reassuring presence, and a flight from the father, from the tyranny of long generations and old traditions, from the law, from oppressive history, into the virgin soil of a new land.

Tales of America had been filtering into Valle del Sole since before the turn of the century. My grandfather's own father, Giovanni Uccello,

had been among the first wave of emigrants from the village, setting out at age 33, sometime in the early 1890s, to see the world, and leaving behind his own aging parents, his wife, and four children, including my then two-year-old grandfather.

'He had never stepped foot out of Valle del Sole,' my grandfather had told me, 'but then one day a devil got into him, because the crops had failed, and because my oldest brother, Luciano, had died from malaria, and because the only friend he had here by then was his bottle. He was a great curser, and sometimes when things went wrong he would raise his voice as high as the heavens! But this time he decided that God wasn't listening, so he packed his bag and was gone.'

It took a while, though, before my great-grandfather reached America. News from him was infrequent, since he was both proud and illiterate, and would not often lower himself to request from a fellow traveller that he help him compose a letter home; but occasionally a note and a small sum of money would make its way back to Valle del Sole. Giovanni set up first in Abyssinia, not long before the war there, as a trader. But after the Italian defeat he set off again, and took up residence on a island off the coast--'Zanzibar,' my grandfather had speculated, though for him too these stories were mostly hearsay; but I used to roll the name lovingly off my tongue, and it conjured up images of jungle and wild fruit and animals. My grandfather joked that his father had taken an African bride there, and fathered several children, so that somewhere now I had a brood of creamy-brown cousins who prayed in African but cursed in Italian.

The next word from Giovanni Uccello didn't come till several years

later, from Argentina, by which point my grandfather, now a boy of about ten, knew of his father only as a mythical figure who roamed the globe like a latter-day Ulysses. His mother, meanwhile, knitting by the fire after a day of back-breaking labour in the fields, told him stories of his father's journeys, stories which ended always with the promise of the father's imminent return.

Finally, though, after almost ten years of wandering, my great-grandfather reached his goal--letters began to arrive from New York City, written now in his own hand, for he had apparently taught himself to write. And along with the letters came money, small sums at first but growing larger as time went on, until substantial amounts were arriving almost monthly. Giovanni never specified where the money had come from--he only said that he had gone into business, and that business was good; that he hoped one day soon to bring over his family, since his sons would have a better future in America than in Valle del Sole; that he wanted to make up for all the years he had left the family to fend for itself, because it shamed him to think of how he had abandoned them; that he thought of his wife and family every day, and every penny he earned was for their benefit; that New York was the largest city in the world, full of Italians and foreigners and tall buildings two hundred feet high, and of new things called motor cars, which ran without horses and made a great noise as they moved through the streets.

But then as suddenly as they had begun, the letters and payments stopped. Six months passed without a word, a year, a year and a half. Finally my grandfather's older brother was sent on a mission to find him; but he did not fare well on his journey. He had never been out of

Valle del Sole, spoke only the crudest local dialect, could barely read or write. When he arrived at Ellis Island (and that name was one well-engraved into the minds of the villagers, as both a purgatory before the promised land, and the first circle of hell) the authorities wanted to send him back on the first ship, because the journey had made him ill. Finally, though, after five days of quarantine, he was let in, only to find that New York was not the city of gold he'd been led to expect but a swarming, sprawling ghetto full of beggars, where everyone was too busy with his own problems to help a poor, confused foreigner who had lost his father. He managed, after several days' search, to locate the return address his father had used to write on his letters, but he found there only an old, gutted tenement, the windows all broken out and fire-charred. He spent the next two days crying in his squalid hotel room, and returned to Italy in despair.

'*Sparito*,' my grandfather had told me. 'No one knows if he died in a fire, or if he just ~~dis~~appeared off the face of the earth. When Silvio's father went over a few years later he asked all around, but no one had ever heard of Giovanni Uccello.'

The money that had been saved from the father's remittances had eventually built the house grandfather now owned; but the tale of Giovanni Uccello had long served as a cautionary one in Valle del Sole. And from stories like his, a vision had developed of two Americas, the good America and the bad America. America the land of mysterious riches, of tall buildings and motor cars, where a man might arrive with nothing and become a king; but also the land of vast slums and beggars in the streets, of confusion and babble; which swallowed men up without

leaving a trace. The story of Silvio's father had only strengthened this double image, for though he had come back with his pockets bulging with American dollars, the money had been a curse, and he had died in poverty and with his household *'non sistemata,'* as the villagers put it, the greatest curse that could befall a father, to die with little hope that his line would be continued. And other tales, too, from men who had gone and returned or who had staked out their claims and remained there, sending word of their successes and failures to their relations back home, all veered between the extremes of America the blessed and America the cursed. Tales of Italians who lived in homes like palaces, with fountains and gardens and floors and walls of white marble, who wore fancy suits and owned great companies that bore their names; of easy work and easy mobility, where doctors ate at the same table as farmers, and no man was forced to grovel at another's feet. But also tales of violence, of gangsters who ruled the cities like a military force, and gunned down their enemies in the streets, in cold blood; of slums where people lived like animals and never had enough to eat, and brothers killed each other over a slice of bread; of Italians who were spit on and cursed and treated like savages, who spent months without work because no one would hire them. And tales too of a new part of America called Canada, a vast, cold place with rickety wooden houses and wide expanses of bush and snow; but also of flat, green fields that stretched for miles, of lakes as wide as the sea, an unfallen world without mountains or rocky earth.

But with the coming of the Fascists, emigration had come to a sudden end, and those long years of confinement, when the villagers had seen

their world crumble around them, seemed to have increased the attraction of foreign destinations. At first there had been hopes of a new Italy, of another Risorgimento: the school in Valle del Sole had been built during that time; farmers had received subsidies to buy plots of land or been freed from ancient feudal obligations to unscrupulous landlords; the rail link from Rocca Secca, even if without help from the government, had finally pushed through to Isernia; and there was the promise of new roads, of electricity, of running water. But the dream had quickly gone sour, with the costly and finally fruitless campaigns in Africa, and with the unmitigated disaster of the Second World War, ordeals which had put the villagers through long days of hunger and fear, and had cost many of them the lives of their sons.

And so, at the end of the war, a new pattern began to emerge. Pre-Fascist emigration had been a somewhat haphazard thing: destinations had varied from New York and Chicago to Brazil, Argentina, and Abyssinia, and many of those who left did so with the intention of returning, once they had made their money, to build a new home in their native village and live out their old age in relative ease. There were a dozen or so such homes in Valle del Sole that like my grandfather's had been built with foreign earnings, though the only thing which distinguished them from the others, in most cases, was their greater size--perhaps their builders had feared the envy which greater ostentation might have brought them, or had lacked the imagination or will to encroach on the uniformity of tradition. But since the war the aspirations of the villagers, it seemed, had begun to change. No longer did they return to the village to build new homes; now they abandoned old ones, leaving

them boarded up and crumbling, calling wives, children, and sometimes aging parents to join them once they had established themselves in the New World. Poverty, war, education, the growing sense among the villagers that they were being left behind the normal progress of history, had led to a constantly swelling exodus, one much more systematic than in the past, and thus more efficient and threatening. In Valle del Sole the pattern of this exodus depended in part on new immigration laws, which had put an end to the turn-of-the-century days of unrestricted movement; but it depended too on the simple histories of Salvatore Mancini of Valle del Sole and Umberto Lungo of Castilucci, who in the early twenties had set out from their native villages to rediscover America.

Mancini and Lungo had served together in the first war, and in the jobless days of demobilization had forged an accord to travel to America, one which, in a rare instance of successful co-operation between Valle del Sole and Castilucci, they managed to keep. Unable to get the necessary documents to make their passage legal, they crept across the Alps in the dead of winter and joined up with a no-questions-asked ship in Marseilles, as deck hands. After a long journey across rough seas they arrived finally at Ellis Island--where, having no papers, they were promptly turned away. Undeterred, Mancini and Lungo smuggled themselves into the country to the north, where they worked their way along the border, looking for a moment when they might cross back into the promised land. But they settled finally at a small farming community, and whether from inertia, or because they simply became enamoured of the little town they had settled in, they never attempted the crossing. Within a few years they had called over their wives and children, and

settled into their new lives; and then for the next twenty years, because of Fascism and war, they remained almost completely cut off from their homeland.

At the end of the war, though, natives of Valle del Sole and Castilucci began to think again of their relatives across the sea. In Rocca Secca, emigrants were flocking to Argentina, because that country had opened its doors wide, and because a large number of Rocca Seccans had established themselves there in the early part of the century. But people from Valle del Sole had never had much luck with Argentina for some reason, tended to return from there with little more in their pockets than when they had left; and with several of the villagers returning from the American embassy in Rome with stories about 'quotas' on 'southern Europeans,' and with Salvatore Mancini sending back letters to his relations describing the large farm he had built up for himself, with wide, flat fields overlooking a lake and a dozen hired workers during harvest time, all of them '*inglesi*,' people who had been in the country all their lives and yet had not done what he, Salvatore Mancini, had done in a short twenty years--with all these things in mind, and a dream to be free of *la miseria* which had plagued them all their lives, the people of Valle del Sole began to turn their thoughts to the vast northern country where their townsman had settled.

By a curious coincidence, one which the villagers took as a sign, the town in which Mancini and Lungo had chosen to stop was called the Sun Parlour, or, as it came to be known in Italian, Sala del Sole. So, hanging their hopes on a name and a dream, the villagers began to pack their trunks, Mancini on the other end signing papers for next-of-kin or

guaranteeing twelve months of farm work for those who as yet had no relatives to sponsor them, and the great trek began--*dalla valle del sole alla sala del sole*, as the villagers said--swelling exponentially as those who left in turn called over their own next-of-kin, so that by 1957 there was no one in Valle del Sole whose features were not reflected in some cousin or sibling in a sister town across the sea.

A steady stream of news about the New World flowed into Valle del Sole through letters and hearsay, but old stories gradually mingled with new to form one great jumbled heap in the minds of the villagers, subtleties of border and distance soon swallowed up once again by the word which the peasants clutched like a shibboleth, America. Since they were accustomed to seeing the world outside as occupying about the same amount of space as their own village, America had become in their minds a sort of sprawling but somehow very intimate grand village where tall buildings and slums and motor cars mingled with forests, green fields, and wide lakes, and where on Sundays all Italians got together at the great village bar to exchange news from home and play games of *tre sette*. And somewhere in the middle of that grand village, on *Ciesta-nut Strite* or on *Concessione Numero Tre*, were their own blood relations, beckoning.

But the double image of America the good and the bad had remained. And now as much as ever people took sides, with a force and conviction out of all proportion to their limited knowledge. People like my grandfather Vittorio, who had dropped stone dead in rage at his son's desertion; people like my father, who had left behind wife and child and flouted a father's curse to seek out better fortunes. For often it was

not the facts, finally, which determined a person's view of the New World. Giuseppina Danello, for instance, whose household was saddled with her own aging and decrepit parents, had nothing but ill to say of America.

'In America,' she'd say, 'the women have to work like slaves. All day in the fields, all night in the factory, then they still have to break their bones in the house, because no one feeds the children unless they do and the clothes don't get washed by themselves. And for lunch in the afternoon you get fifteen minutes, and you eat a little piece of cheese between two pieces of cheap bread.—And the bread hasn't even been cooked properly, it sticks in your mouth like glue. They have to put sugar in it, otherwise it wouldn't taste like anything. And when their parents get old, they just leave them in a hospital to die. That's America.'

Maria Maiale, on the other hand, whose husband refused to leave *his* aging parents, though Maria had a brother in Sala del Sole and an almost certain ticket there, never lost a chance to declaim on America's virtues, especially if she was in the presence of her husband or in-laws.

'America! *Jesu*, they have machines there for everything, my brother tells me, machines to cook your food on, machines to wash your clothes in, machines to keep your meat from going bad, right in the kitchen, so you never have to step into the street the whole day. And big furnaces to heat your house so the hot air comes right into your bedroom. Even the floors are warm! You can walk around without socks in the middle of winter. And telephones in every house. It's the law

there, *per l'amore di Cristo*, you have to have a telephone, whether you want it or not. And when will we see a telephone in Valle del Sole, *prego*? When our children's children are dead and buried in the grave!'

Then there were the young women of Valle del Sole, who primped and preened and promenaded themselves in the village square when occasionally a young bachelor would return from overseas to choose a bride, whose every second word then was a wistful Ah-merrr-i-cah; but who dropped the word entirely whenever the young man had chosen another, he always seemed to choose another.

'And who needs those *Americani*,' they'd say then, 'who think they're so big with their fancy suits that they buy in stores. They think their little birds are made of gold, but don't they have just a little stick of meat, like all the rest? I hope their wives cut them off for them and grind them into the sausage, they say that's what women do in America.'

But my own mother, on the subject of America, as on so many other subjects where I felt a word from her would have cleared up my own small-headed confusion, had kept up a consistent silence. She had not, as Giuseppina and Maria had their children, fed me with visions of horrors or wonders, had always brushed off debates, whenever the subject came up among the villagers, with a laugh or a joke. The place might not have existed for her--either that, or it had already served its purpose, in taking her husband off her hands, and she had no further use for it. And so I had had to garner my own images from the talk of the town, in all its contradictions, and from unreliable sources like

Fabrizio.

'In America,' Fabrizio had told me once, 'everyone lives in houses made out of glass. When you're taking a bath everyone can come by and look at you. You can see all the women in their underwear. People look at each other all the time there.'

A pause.

'Why,' I said finally, falling once again into Fabrizio's trap.

'Because in America,' Fabrizio said casually, 'nobody believes in God.'

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XXXI--THE POINT OF DEPARTURE

And so, suddenly, we were off to America. After four days my mother returned from Rome with passport and tickets in hand. Normally these procedures took as much as several months--obtaining a passport, in particular, was a long and gruelling process, since it involved a journey through the tangled, thorny byways of Italian bureaucracy, visits to notaries for signed affadivits, bribes of wine and cheese and 500 lire notes to recalcitrant officials, travels into Rocca Secca and Campobasso to collect documents of birth, of marriage, of taxes paid or unpaid, of completed army service, and then finally a long wait during which everything hung in the balance, for one missed document or misplaced signature might scotch the whole process, and you would have to begin again. But here was my mother's passport, 'Repvblica Italiana' impressed in gold across its small green cover, and one of its thick parchment pages stamped with a box of script where numbers and signatures had been filled in in pen and with a beautiful blue crest that had 'Canada' printed around its circumference. And here, too, in green plastic folders, an etching of a large ship across the top of them, were two passages aboard the liner Saturnia, departing from Naples for a place called Halifax at 10 a.m. on 15 March 1957, only a week away.

'Ma dov'è quest' Alifax?' I asked my mother. 'I thought we were going to America.' Though for a moment I hoped that we were not going to America at all, but to some strange, exotic place where my black-haired father would not be waiting for us.

'America is a big place,' my mother said. 'You'll find out when we

get there.'

And I would not have long to wait. Upon my mother's return from Rome, with only a week to go before our ship set sail, all the wheels of departure suddenly churned into motion, with none of the slow grind that was usual in these cases. There had been three other departures over the course of the winter: Maria Mancini, distant relative by marriage to Salvatore, who had packed up children and belongings to join her husband across the sea; Giuseppe Mastroangelo, who had taken with him his wife, four children, and two parents; Gaetano Di Menna, who had left behind his family to join his brother. But in each of these cases the departure had been announced well in advance, allowing proper time for all the rituals of separation to be played out, for each relation to prepare a final meal, for belongings to be sold off or bequeathed, for trunks to be built and packed, for doors and windows to be boarded up, for hundreds of small parcels to be wrapped up in string and brown paper by those being left behind, each to be delivered to some relative across the sea, as little packets of food were sometimes dropped into graves to be carried to the spirits on the other side. And once all these rites had been completed, the final mood on the eve of departure, for all the tears and wails, was one of resignation and acceptance, all other feelings of both envy and loss having run themselves out.

But for those leaving, too, these rituals served a purpose: through all the trials of documents obtained and officials bribed and relatives assuaged, they slowly grew their eyes and ears and limbs and tested out the strength of them, preparing for the final shock and thrill of emergence, and a new land. But my mother and I, it seemed, were being

ripped untimely from the little world that had nurtured us till then, without gestation--our own trunk was built in a day, and packed in a matter of hours; and our house, which had once seemed, even through the months of silence and anger, like a solid constant, unmoveable, infested as it was with lives and smells and images, became almost overnight an empty shell; all the serviceable furniture carted up to Zia Lucia's and boards nailed across the shutters. My grandfather was placed once again on the rack, amidst groans and curses, and removed to the home where he had spent his childhood, into a small ground floor room that looked onto the spine of Colle di Papa; the sheep and pigs, confused and stubborn, were chased out of their stable and into Zia Lucia's, which had been abandoned for years; and my mother and I, together again in the last days, installed ourselves temporarily in the stark room that Marta usually slept in, sharing a bed that had known only Marta's crippled, unmarried solitude, while Marta slept in the kitchen on the flowered mattress that had been mine.

Now--and soon I will have to talk about now, for more and more, as I write the past, I feel the deforming pressure of the present--now, thinking back on that time of departure, I see a parade of images passing before me: images of the valley in spring time, the fields green with the promise of wheat, the breeze fresh with new-fallen rain; of the long shadows that rose up to meet you when you rose with first light, the village at that hour just shaking off its sleep, the farmers making their way to the fields, hoes propped up a shoulder; of sunny days spent dreaming in the pastures to the quiet munching of sheep; of harvest time, the mules coming in from the fields laden with brown sheaves of

wheat, old women winnowing in a courtyard, shoulders stooped, chaff flying like a swarm of locusts against the dying sun.

But back then it was only when the last scrap of furniture had been removed from my grandfather's house, leaving my mother's packed trunk to sit alone in the middle of the kitchen floor, that departure took on, in my mind, the visible form of a truth--even the boat tickets, with their little toy ship at the top, had not been enough to convince me, for how could such small slips of paper be enough to change the shape of the world? And in the few days that remained before our actual departure, I was not able to bring that truth into any focus, could not, in my limited imagination, forsee how a place left behind would look to the one who had left it. And so I saw Valle del Sole then as I had always seen it--as the centre of the world, the only frame of reference by which anything else could have meaning. I walked through the streets, it was true, with a strange sense of lightness, as if at any moment I might simply lift off the cobblestones and walk on air; and voices and faces seemed to fade away from me, lose their power, suddenly, to impress me with their presence. But though my head was full of images of the New World, of tall buildings, of wide green fields, of a dark-haired stranger who was my father, I could not believe in the truth of them, for even my father now seemed like someone I had simply imagined in a dream; and all I could see clearly in the future was a kind of limitless space that took shape in my head as the sea, and a journey into this space that took direction not from its destination but from its point of departure, which somehow could not help but always remain visible on the receding shore.

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XXXII--THREE GIFTS

In my last week in Valle del Sole, Fabrizio returned from his exile. I saw him one day, as I came out of school, chasing his father's sheep through the late-winter mud and slush of via San Giuseppe, looking a little frailer and thinner than usual but still in his cap and knickers, swaggering as he walked, wielding his sheep stick like a sceptre. I did not call out to him, though; I waited at the top of the church steps until he had rounded the corner at the edge of town and bullied his sheep up the path that led to the communal pastures on the other side of Colle di Papa. The pastures there would still be covered with snow, I thought; but I was glad that he had not gone towards the valley, where I would be tending my own sheep.

I led the sheep down to the Valley of the Pigs that afternoon, a fair distance from the town, and stopped at a spot of grass that had survived the winter. Down at that altitude the snow had all melted, leaving behind naked grey fields dotted here and there with patches of green. The sun was shining but a cold breeze was whipping down brisk and sharp from the still snow-covered upper slopes of the mountains. The rock I had chosen to sit on was damp and clammy, and moisture had begun to seep through the seat of my pants. The sheep, though, seemed glad of the fresh air and sun, and were grazing peacefully in a little huddled mass, their chops smacking with the wet of mashed grass.

Towards late afternoon, I noticed a small figure coming towards me from the direction of the village cemetery. As the figure came closer I could make out two calves shining palely between the edges of socks and

knickers, and two eyes staring into the setting sun from under the cocked brim of a brown corduroy cap.

Fabrizio came up without saying a word. He sat down cross-legged on the ground and plucked a long stem of dried grass to chew. I fiddled with my sheep stick, poking it into the wet earth.

'My father says it's no use sending someone like me to school,' Fabrizio said finally. 'He says I'm as stupid as a mule and so he's going to make me work like a mule. The only way you can make a mule understand anything is with a whip.'

Fabrizio paused to spit out a wad of chewed grass.

'Last week,' he went on, 'the boss in Rocca Secca sent me home. I was helping to carry the wheat out of the stable to the mill when I saw a big rat on one of the bags, so I picked up a big rock and threw it at its head. The rock made a big hole in the bag and the wheat fell all over the floor. When the boss came in and saw the hole, pom! across my face, just like my father. He says, "*Ma che sei, scimunoit?*"'--Fabrizio put on the thick accent of Rocca Seccans--'"*ma che sei, impazzoit?*" So he sent me home. My father wanted to crack my skull.'

Fabrizio stretched out his skinny legs and leaned back on his elbows, holding his body with the studied nonchalance of a young man.

'Anyway what does it matter to me,' he said. 'I'm just going to be a peasant like my father. He says you don't have to know *matematica* to stick a seed in the ground. *E quella maestra*'--here Fabrizio sat up again, bloating his cheeks and lifting out his arms, to show wide girth, and making a jogging motion with his upper body like a fat person walking--'*quella maestra* gave me a pain in the ass. "Fabrizio"'--

taking on the teacher's falsetto--'*"dica, Fabrizio, ma chi sono le tre persone in Dio?" Addio, quella porca!*' He gave a little snort, to imitate a pig.

A long period of silence followed. I kept my eyes on the sheep, watching them bite at their little tufts of grass, their teeth cutting sharp and close, like knives. Somewhere nearby a few birds were singing, come back up from the south for the dawning of spring; I looked up towards a clump of trees a few hundred yards up the slope, but even in the bare branches the birds were hidden.

Finally Fabrizio reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out two crumpled cigarettes.

'Here,' he said, holding one out to me and making a gesture towards me with his chin. I took it and Fabrizio lit it for me, then lit his own. I gagged a little on my first puff.

'You're out of practice,' Fabrizio said. 'You'll have to get used to it again. In America everybody smokes like chimneys. Sometimes you can't even see where you're going because of all the smoke.'

'That's not true,' I said suddenly. In fact I had no idea if it was true or not, but something inside me had been suddenly irritated by Fabrizio's easy assertion.

'I was only making a joke,' he said after a moment, picking up a clump of dirt and crushing it onto his knickers. 'Sometimes you have to make a joke or you get tired of thinking about things.'

The clump of dirt he had crushed had left an undulating pattern on the pocket of his knickers. He bent over now and blew gently with his smoke-filled breath into the centre of it, the dirt retreating in an

ever-widening circle.

'When you go to America,' he said, 'you can write me a letter and tell me what it's like. When I have enough money you can call me over. Everyone lives in a big house there and they smoke cigarettes whenever they want, even the kids.'

'I'm going to stop smoking,' I said. 'I don't think my father will let me smoke.'

'*Bŏ*, your father, you don't have to worry about him. In America the fathers spend the whole day in the factory, and then you can do whatever you want.'

A pause.

'You promise to send me a letter?' he said. 'No joking?'

'Yes,' I said.

Fabrizio leaned forward abruptly and set his cigarette down on a stone.

'Then we have to make it good. Give me your hand.'

Now he pulled a small silver jack-knife out of his pocket and clicked out the blade. Before I could draw away my hand he had brought the blade up to my thumb and slid its edge against my skin.

'*Ma che fai!*' I shouted, jerking my hand away and sucking in my breath. A little bubble of blood had burst through the skin, and instinctively I brought my thumb to my mouth to suck on the wound. But Fabrizio was not paying me any attention--he was busy repeating the same operation on himself.

'Give me your hand,' he said, 'we have to mix blood.'

Now he joined our bleeding thumbs together, rubbing his cut against

mine several times, the edges of his slit skin catching against the edges of mine. Then he held the two thumbs together for a long moment.

'*E fatto*,' he said finally, drawing his thumb away and sucking on it. 'Now we have the same blood. A person can never hurt someone who has the same blood. This is just to make sure that I'll come and stay with you in America.'

He clicked the blade of his knife shut and held the knife out to me.

'Here,' he said, 'my uncle brought it to me from America. Look, it says right here.' Fabrizio pointed to an inscription on the knife's silver casing, but though the individual letters were familiar their arrangement seemed random and meaningless.

'You'll understand when you get there,' Fabrizio said. 'Here, take it.'

'*Grazie*,' I mumbled, taking the knife in my uncut hand and running my thumb over its smooth casing before slipping it into my pocket. It joined, there, the one lire coin I had received from Luciano many months before--for a long time I had kept the coin in a glass jar in my room, along with the other coins I had collected that day in Rocca Secca; but when we had moved to Zia Lucia's I had grown afraid that it might get left behind if I did not keep it close to me. Now, as my fingers came up against its cold metal, they closed around it tentatively and began to draw it out of my pocket.

'I have to go,' Fabrizio said, recovering his cigarette and standing. He wiped his clotting thumb against his knickers. 'I chased the sheep into the pit by the cemetery. I think one of them broke his leg because he was crying like a devil.'

I had the coin out of my pocket now, clenched in my fist; but Fabrizio had already started to walk away.

'Ho, Vittò!' he bellowed, turning to wave. '*Buona fortuna in America!*'

'Fabrizio!' I called out. He turned. But feeling again the texture and weight of the coin in my hand, remembering the story of good fortune that had gone along with it, I slipped it back into my pocket.

'Fabrizio did not wait for me to speak.

'Don't forget to send me a letter!' he shouted, walking backwards. '*Numero tredici, via Giovanni Battista!*' He turned and walked on, stopped for a moment to grind his cigarette into the earth, half-turned to wave again, then dipped his hands into his back pockets and disappeared finally into the approaching twilight.

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There were other leave-takings to be made, and other gifts to be received. The day after my encounter with Fabrizio, I lingered behind at school after classes. Since the New Year I had no longer been the regular sweeper.

'It's best if the other children don't think I'm treating you any different from the rest of them,' the teacher had said to me. And I had murmured in agreement, hiding mixed feelings of relief and disappointment. Since then I had been chosen only occasionally to sweep, and so the readings from the *Lives of the Saints* had dwindled to a few times a month.

But today I knew I would not be returning to school again. Antonio Girasole had been chosen to sweep, and was beating up a storm of dust at the back of the room. I glanced towards him as I collected up all my exercise books, then walked hesitantly up to the teacher's desk.

'What is it, Vittorio?' she said gently.

'I can't come to school tomorrow,' I said. 'My mother said I have to go to Rocca Secca to get a shot.'

'*Addio!*' she said, clasping her hands together. 'He can't come to school tomorrow, he says, as if he didn't know that the day after that he's leaving for America, no?'

I nodded. The teacher gazed at me with wet eyes, shaking her head.

'Antonio,' she said, looking towards him, 'leave off that sweeping, you can finish in the morning. Anyways you're filling the room with dust, I've told you a thousand times to be more gentle. All you do is move the dirt from one place to another.'

'*Scusi, maestra*,' Antonio said demurely, head bowed, 'but I can't come in the morning. My mother is in bed with diarrhea, so I have to make the food for all my brothers and sisters.'

'Liar,' the teacher said. 'I saw her only this morning on the street.'

'She got sick this afternoon,' Antonio said.

'Get out of here,' the teacher said, rising from her chair with one arm raised, 'before I break your skull for your lies. And if you're not here first thing in the morning, the devil himself won't want you when I'm through with you.'

Antonio shrugged his shoulders and set down his broom, and the

teacher's narrowed eyes followed him as he left the room. But when he was out of hearing range, the teacher turned back to me, the anger quickly melting from her eyes.

'Come here, Vittorio,' she said, motioning me around the desk; and when I had come up to her she suddenly let out a great sob and reached out her marbled arms to hug me, burying my small face in her heaving bosom. She held me like that for a long moment, rocking me back and forth, shedding her tears in my hair; but the only thing I could think of was the way Fabrizio had called her *quella porca* the previous day, and ballooned out his arms in imitation of her. When she released me, finally, my body flooded with relief.

Make an effort to restrain her sobbing, she reached for a last time into her large leather bag and pulled out her *Lives of the Saints*.

'Take it,' she said tearfully, handing it towards me. 'I hope you will live by it. I hope you will follow their example.'

I took the book and clutched it guiltily under my arm.

'*Grazie*,' I mumbled.

'You know, Vittorio, I too had a son once. He would have been your age now, but he died when he was a baby, and the Lord has not seen fit to give me another one.'

I bowed my head and stared at the floor. Teachers did not have babies, I thought. The woman who was sitting before me, and who I had seen every day for almost two years, seemed suddenly a stranger.

'Go on now,' she said, gesturing with her chin towards the door. 'You don't want to watch me make a fool of myself. Go on home. And when you're in America, I hope you'll think of me. Maybe you'll send me

a letter, no?'

'*SI*,' I murmured.

She wiped at her tears with her palm.

'Here, give me the book,' she said. 'I'll write my address on the front page, so you'll know where to send it.'

When she had finished she showed me what she had written: 'Signora Gelsomina Amicone, 3 Piazza del Tomolo, Rocca Secca.' Everyone in town knew her name, of course; but it was another surprise for me to see it written like that, to think of her as having a name, an address, a house she returned to every night when classes were through.

'Go on now,' she said, still wiping at her tears, and then, planting a last, silent kiss on my forehead, she whispered, '*Buona fortuna*.'

On the eve of our departure, my grandfather called me into his room.

'Close the door,' he said.

In his own house my grandfather's room had been a little cramped, but the view of the valley through the balcony doors had given it a feeling of spaciousness. Here at Zia Lucia's, though, the closeness of his room was unrelieved by any panorama. Zia Lucia's house was on the hill side of the street, cut into the slope, and the only window in my grandfather's room, small and high, looked onto a wall of rocky earth that sloped up steeply from only a foot or two beneath the window's sill. Seeping moisture had coated the lower part of the wall with frothy white sediment, and the room smelt of damp and rot, like an old

blanket left too long in a wet corner.

My grandfather lay propped up on a pillow in the narrow bed that had been carried over from his old room, dressed in a long-sleeved undershirt of coarse cotton. His face had grown pale and gaunt from his confinement, loose skin draped over sharp, thin bones that looked frail as a bird's--he seemed to have aged a dozen years in the past few months. I could no longer remember what he had looked like, then, when he had sat on the terrace of Di Lucci's disputing with the other men of the village or spinning stories for the children--it seemed that other man had never existed, that my grandfather had always been this frail shell which lay before me now.

'Open the drawer in my table,' he said, in a voice already hoarse with emotion, 'and give me my medals.'

The table--its legs repaired, now, after my grandfather's fall--stood against the side wall, under the old sepia photos of my grandfather in uniform and together with his wife, of my mother in first communion dress. I reached into the drawer and pulled out the faded leather case where my grandfather kept his medals. His hand trembled as he reached for it, the blue veins of his wrist standing out stark against his pale skin.

'I've had these medals,' he said, opening the case, 'since 1918, when they were given to me by the Italian government.' He paused, staring into the case for a moment, his eyes, still pink-ringed from his infection, turning wet.

'The first one'--he turned the case towards me and pointed to one of the medals, with a silver medallion and red ribbon--'was given to me for

taking part in the battle of Gorizia, and the second one'--this one had a purple ribbon--`because I was wounded in action. But these two are nothing special. Thousands of men in Italy have the same ones. It's only the third one that has any meaning. Here, look it at.'

He handed the case to me, impatiently almost, as if suddenly anxious to be rid of it. The third medallion, of bronze, bore the inscription `*Al Valore Militare*,' and was impressed with a star surrounded by a wreath. A ribbon of rich blue moire hung down from it, ruffled where a loop connected it to the medallion.

`*Il medaglio militare d'Italia*,' my grandfather said, pronouncing the words with a sharp precision as he took the case back from me; but his voice was tinged not with pride but bitterness. `That was what I got for a wasted life. That and a small pension that couldn't keep a goat alive. And at the time I was foolish enough to think it was enough. Do you know what I got this medal for? For saving the life of a coward. A man who if he was standing before me now I would put a bullet between his eyes. I carried him for a mile and a half, on my back, by God, because his muscles were so stiff with fear he couldn't move, and when the bomb fell that ruined my legs he crawled off without a scratch and left me to rot in the mud. He left me to die there, *per l'amore di Cristo*, after I had saved his life, and no one came back for me until after one of our own horses had finished the damage and left me a cripple. I lay in the mud there for an hour, bullets and bombs falling everywhere, wishing only that I would die. And now I curse God that I did not.'

Tears were streaming down his cheeks now, though his voice was still

dry and bitter. I wanted him to stop speaking, could not make sense of his words, felt them hanging in the air like ice.

'Here,' he said, closing the case with an air of finality and thrusting it towards me, 'take them. If they mean nothing to me at least they might to you, one day. I have no sons, Vittorio, you must be both my son and my grandson. When I die I'll leave the house to you, if you ever come back for it. But now you're lucky to leave this country, because it's a country of Judases and cowards. Mussolini, too, was killed by traitors. Now everyone is brave, now everyone denounces me in the streets, because I've been made a fool. But who was brave then, of those asses and cowards who laugh at me now? Who complained when the school was built, when money came for land? All my life I've been surrounded by traitors and fools. Even my own daughter has betrayed me.'

He said these last words almost in a whisper, his voice choked now with tears, his body trembling. He brought a hand up and brushed it against my cheek.

'Take them,' he said, finally. 'I hope they bring you better fortune than they brought to me.'

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XXXIII--GOODBYE, GOODBYE

The morning of our departure from Valle del Sole dawned wet and grey. I had spent the last few nights in almost constant wakefulness, conscious always of my mother's sleeping form beside me, and of the warm
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bulge that lifted up our sheets--it seemed to hum with a strange energy that charged the air in the room, and I would lay still and stiff in bed, listening the measured rhythms of my mother's breathing and watching her with mixed calm and fear.

That last night I heard the rain coming in the early hours before dawn, the wind on the balcony dragging some object across the metal railing and then hurling it with a muffled clap to the balcony's stone floor; then the first dull splats of rain against the balcony window, building up with increasing insistence into a uniform drone. With the rain a little grey light began to filter through the thin curtains and slowly to give form to the objects in the room--a chair, a rickety table, a crucifix on the wall; and soon my mother began to stir beside me, twitching nervously for several minutes before finally she rolled over on her back, rubbed her hands over her face, and opened her eyes.

'Wake up, Vittorio,' she whispered, tired. 'It's time to go.'

We had breakfast with Zia Lucia and Marta in the quiet that precedes departure, a small fire crackling in the hearth, the rain still beating on the cobblestones outside. My mother seemed tense and irritable. She brought some breakfast into my grandfather but they did not speak.

'Don't trouble yourself about him,' Zia Lucia said in her calm, ancient voice, when my mother had resumed her place at the table. 'Marta has no one else to look after. He will be her father and her son.' Marta looked up from her food to cast her wide, nervous eyes towards my mother, but said nothing.

A small stream of well-wishers began to filter into Zia Lucia's kitchen after breakfast, dripping with rain--Giuseppina and her husband,

Silvio the postman, neighbours, cousins, all of them speaking in low tones, as if at a funeral, and mumbling their wishes for a good journey. Di Lucci came too, solemn on this solemn occasion, but bearing a new toy, a small brown-and-silver-framed camera.

'Just a few pictures before you go,' he whispered to my mother. '*Per ricordo.*'

'Please, Antonio,' my mother said, 'not this morning.'

'*Ma scusa*, Cristina, if not this morning then when?'

But it turned out that he could not take pictures indoors, because it was too dark; and since outside it was still raining, the matter was dropped.

Several people had come bearing envelopes and small brown bundles, but they held them clutched in their hands or hidden under their arms as if embarrassed by them. It was Giuseppina, finally, who approached my mother, holding out a small parcel neatly tied up in white string.

'It's just a little something for my husband's brother,' she said. 'Of course if you don't have any room for it--'

My mother sucked in her breath as if suppressing anger.

'I'm sorry Giuseppina,' she said, 'but I've decided I'm not taking anything. It's nothing against you, but I'm not the one to send as your messenger. Three months ago, if I had gone, not a single one of you would have come to see me off. I don't know why it should be different now.'

Giuseppina stood open-mouthed in surprise at my mother's words.

'If that's how you feel,' she said finally, hesitantly, 'I don't know why I came to see you at all.' She stood for a moment uncertainly,

as if hoping that she had misunderstood, and that some word from my mother would set the matter straight; but when no word came she seemed to gather her pride around her like a cloak, and taking her husband by the arm she marched him to the door. He shot a confused glance back into the room before the two of them stepped out into the rain and were gone.

A silence fell over the room, and a few people made as if to follow them, shuffling nervously where they stood; but at that moment a clatter of hooves outside the door distracted our attention, and a minute later my uncle Pasquale was standing large and smiling in the doorway, a green plastic sheet, dripping rain, held over his shoulders, and a bundle tucked under one arm. It had been months since my mother and I had had any contact with my father's side of the family, and my uncle's sudden presence in the doorway deepened the tension in the room. But my uncle, as if making a willful effort to ignore the stir which his presence had caused, simply tossed his poncho aside and strode towards my mother without a pause, then bent over her belly to kiss her cheek, natural as rain.

'So finally going to America,' he said, keeping his voice neutral and friendly. My uncle Pasquale was a man who avoided confrontation; but it was hard to tell now what unvoiced questions or reproofs he was harbouring, what months of cursing and bitter argument amongst my father's relatives were hidden by his easy tone. He had always liked my mother, it had seemed to me; but that admiration must certainly have been strained by his concern for his brother's honour.

'You should have let us know,' he said, in the same neutral tone.

'I only found out from the gossip of the town. Mario didn't say anything in his letters.'

But my mother turned away from him awkwardly.

'Everything was decided in a hurry,' she said. 'Would you like some coffee? There's still some warm on the fire--here, I'll make it up for you.'

'No, no, it's all right, I have to get to the market.' He took the parcel he had under his arm and held it out tentatively towards my mother. 'Mamma wants you to bring this to Mario. *Qualche fissaroia*. A shirt or something. As if they don't have shirts in America. If you don't have a place for it I'll take it back. It's only a token.'

My mother hesitated, and for a moment it seemed the tension and silence in the room had nearly come together into an audible shout: surely she could not refuse something from her own mother-in-law, destined for her own husband.

'It's all right,' my mother said finally. 'I'll find a place for it.' She stuffed the parcel into one of the two large wicker handbags where she had packed a few clothes and some food for the trip. In one of the bags, the previous evening, I had put a few of my own belongings--the teacher's *Lives of the Saints*, and, guiltily, as if my acquisitive nature had led me to obtain by subterfuge things whose meaning I didn't understand, and which I should not have had, my grandfather's medals, hoping that my mother would not see them. My only other worldly belongings I carried in my pockets--Fabrizio's knife, Luciano's coin, and a five hundred lire note for which I had exchanged at Di Lucci's bar (at a profit of 35 lire) two large fistsful of five and ten lire coins

that made up my life savings. It was a hefty sum I thought, and the knowledge that the bill was folded neat and unseen in my front pocket made me feel important and grave.

Denied of a confrontation between my mother and my uncle, our visitors had started to filter away now, mumbling goodbyes as they left but not coming to kiss my mother on the cheeks, still in confusion after my mother's words to Giuseppina. It was an awkward scene, and my mother did not try to make it any easier, standing half-way across the room with her arms folded sternly across her chest and saying, 'Well, yes, goodbye,' as if only impatient for the leave-takings to be over, and to gone. Only Di Lucci, my uncle, and Silvio remained by the time we heard the sound of a horn above the patter of rain outside, growing louder as it came down from the high road, beating out the rhythm of a tune in someone's head; in a few minutes an engine roared up via San Giuseppe and stopped outside the door, and Cazzingulo popped his head inside the door. My mother had arranged for him to carry us and our belongings to the bus station in Rocca Secca.

'*Oh, ma è questa la casa? Che figura ha fatto questa mattina*! It's raining like a bitch. We'll have to hurry if you don't mind, signora, I have a dozen people in the back of my truck who want to break my balls.'

My uncle and Silvio and Di Lucci went up to the old house to help Cazzingulo load our trunk into his truck, while my mother sent me into my grandfather's room for a final goodbye. He was muttering and shaking his head when I went in, and though his eyes were filled with tears, he seemed possessed with a great, unspoken anger.

'I hope to God she doesn't ruin your life as she ruined her own,' he muttered, and then reaching out a thin hand towards me he drew me near and bent forward to press his grizzled face against my own, his tears hot against my skin and his hands clutching me with a force that seemed to gather up all the strength that remained in him.

'Go, go,' he said hoarsely, releasing me.

'Go up to the house and wait for me there,' my mother said gently when I came out, and then, turning to Zia Lucia, 'please, Zia, I want just a few minutes alone. I'm sorry to send you into the rain.'

But Zia Lucia merely nodded and rose from her chair, and she, Marta and I walked through the rain to where the others stood waiting. The trunk had been loaded, along with a new green suitcase that my mother had bought in Rocca Secca; they had been shoved between the limbs of six or seven people who sat cramped and sullen in the back of Cazzingulo's truck. Cazzingulo stood in the doorway of the house.

'Is she coming? The bus from Rocca Secca leaves in half an hour.'

We huddled into the deserted kitchen of my grandfather's house to wait. Di Lucci was there, his unused camera hanging from his neck, and Silvio, fiddling with his buttons, and my uncle Pasquale. We waited in funereal silence, while the rain pounded against the metal roof of Cazzingulo's pick-up. I fingered the one lire coin in my pocket, regretting now that I had not given it to Fabrizio; but the surge of generosity made me think fearfully of my book and my medals, and afraid that they might be left behind I rushed out into the rain before anyone could restrain me and back to Zia Lucia's to get the bags that had been left there.

The door to my grandfather's room had been left slightly ajar. He and my mother were having an argument, voices low but sharp with anger.

'Have you gone crazy!' I caught, from my grandfather. 'So help me God, if you go through with this madness I'll pray every day of my life that you rot in hell!'

'And what would you have me do? Go to the hell that's waiting for me there?'

'You'll face your sins, and pray that God will have mercy on your soul!'

'I've paid for my sins a thousand times over!' But now my mother sensed my presence in the room, and wheeled around.

'Go, Vittorio, for Christ's sake! I told you to wait at the house.'

'I came back for the bags,' I said.

'Well take them and go!'

'And the boy!' my grandfather said, shouting at full voice now. 'What'll become of him? You won't take him away from me like this!'

I ran out into the rain, dragging the two bags through the mud; but now the shouts of my mother and grandfather were clearly audible in the street, and the group huddled in the kitchen of the old house had come out into the rain at the sound of them.

'I'll take my own son where I damn well please,' we heard, 'and not you nor anyone is going to stop me!'

'Then get out! Get out of this house! And if you ever step through that door again I swear I'll throttle you with my own hands!'

Now my mother came storming out of Zia Lucia's house.

'To hell with you all!' she shouted, and then, to a bewildered

Cazzingulo as she marched up towards the truck, `Come on, let's go, don't stand around like an ass.' She took the two bags from me and threw them into the front seat, ignoring the little crowd that still stood gathered to see us off, and would probably have climbed into the truck and ridden off without another word had she not turned a last time towards the village and seen that a much larger crowd, in fact, had gathered behind us: all along via San Giuseppe they stood watching, come out onto balconies into the rain, standing on stoops in the shadows of doorways, huddled under jackets or shawls in the street--the women who had watched my mother's door for long months for the least glimpse of truth they might hang a tale on, the men who had often skirted that door when they'd walked out to the fields, the children who had tortured me with names and humiliations, all come out now to witness this final parting, to stare at my mother as the rain glued her dress to her skin and curled her hair into long, glistening coils. They might have been posing for a portrait, offering us a final frozen image of themselves, so still and rapt did they stand, only the hard drone of the rain relieving their still silence. But when my mother saw them standing there her face lit up suddenly with a violent anger.

`Fools!' she shouted. `Fools and hypocrites! You tried to kill me but you see that I'm still alive! And now you come to watch me hang but I won't be hanged, not by your stupid laws and superstitions. You talk of God! But I tell you God won't spare a single one of you, he'll wipe this town and all its stupidities off the face of the earth, because not one of you knows what it means to be free and to make a choice, and your souls will rot when you die as surely as they rot while you're alive.

You are the ones who are dead, not me!'

A burnished silence fell over the street, even the rain seeming suddenly cowed and hushed; the villagers stood as still as stone, as if they had merged with the rock of walls and pavement, become finally themselves simply crags and swells in the hard mountain face of the village. My mother quickly hustled me into the truck, then turned to Cazzingulo, who still stood gaping in the rain with the rest.

'Get in and drive,' she said, climbing in beside me, and slamming her door shut. Cazzingulo came around and slid into the driver's seat.

'*Ma, scusa, signora*,' he said, scratching his chin, 'I know that as long as I get paid it's none of my business--'

'Then drive!' my mother shouted. 'The only mistake I made was that I didn't leave this hell a dozen years ago, when I had the chance. Drive!'

So Cazzingulo started up the engine and lurched into gear, and the truck moved off. Through the rain-streaked side-view mirror I had one last glimpse of the villagers--they had begun to move now, drifting like wraiths towards the edge of town, shawls and jackets drawn over their heads; but no friendly waves of goodbye, goodbye to grace our exit, only the gaping mouths and wide eyes of shock. And in a moment we had gained the high road and they had disappeared from view forever, as my mother and I rode out of a place in time, a place we could never return to, the Valley of the Sun.

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XXXV--THE SEA

To the sea, to the sea. A bus ride down pitted, mountain-slung roads, lumbering along in a great beast crammed with other travellers, hardened day labourers in coarse home-spun jerseys and cracked hobnailed boots, freshly-shaved young soldiers in sharp-creased khaki, adolescent town girls who covered their mouths when they spoke, to hide their lipstick. Long, switchbacked descents into greening rain-drenched valleys, then the sudden grinding churn of the gears and groan of the engine as the driver urged the bus up another rise, up and up, with hairpin straining, into cypress forests and small stony villages still crusted with snow, though the rain poured unabated against the slashing wipers. After several hours of gut-wrenching swerves and rattles, the land began by slow degrees to ease into gentle rolls, and finally the bus rumbled onto a long, wide highway of smooth black, and the clouds gave way to widening swatches of pale spring blue; while beside me the hard anger in my mother's eyes melted slowly into runnels of quiet tears, which she hid from the other passengers by bowing her head and bringing a discreet hand to her cheek. 'NAPOLI 13,' a sign read, and in the distance I could make out the almost perfect lines of a great triangle of earth rising up towards the sky, the Vesuvius; and moments later we were into the smoke-stacked outskirts of the city, past hoardings and streetside markets and great heaps of rotting garbage, into narrow streets lined with mottled pink buildings and crammed with cars and carts and people, until finally the bus came to a lurching stop in a crowded square where boys my age--but looking somehow much older, with

their rolled sleeves and pant legs and their insolent faces--stooped and waded in a large circular fountain, collecting coins thrown in by passersby.

We spent the night in a dim, sepia-coloured hotel room, a gilt-framed picture of the Last Supper hanging over the bed and curtains of dirty red velvet draped over a long, narrow window. Our trunk, hauled off the roof of the bus by thick-armed men who had grinned at my mother through rotting teeth and called leering comments to her in rounded accents I couldn't understand, had been left in a room off the hotel lobby. My mother had hardly spoken since we'd left Valle del Sole, and all night long, under the watchful eyes of Jesus and his apostles, she twitched and turned, as if wrestling a phantom, the large bulge of her belly dragging the sheets away from me and leaving me exposed to the room's cold, so that I couldn't sleep. When I finally drifted off I slipped for a final time into my familiar recurring dream, my mother and I emerging for a last attempt at escape into the stone coolness of an ogre-watched passage; but though we walked deeper and deeper into the shadows of the tunnel's circle, the ogre did not appear, until finally, wrapped now in darkness, I turned to my mother, only to realize with horror that she was not beside me. My mouth formed around a scream; but then a hand reached out and touched my shoulder.

'Wake up,' my mother said. 'It's time to go.'

In a small, battered Cinquecento, our trunk strapped precariously to the roof with ropes, my mother and I made the last leg of our journey to the sea. Our driver, a small, gaunt-faced man with a thick clot of blood in one eye, kept up a steady stream of banter which I couldn't

understand, my mother responding occasionally in a crisp, rich Italian I'd never heard her speak before, more flowing and clean even than la maestra's. I fought off sleep in the back seat, drunk from the exhaust fumes which blew in like ghosts through the driver's open window, and which lingered heavy and still at every intersection. Finally, while I hovered in half sleep, my mother and the blood-eyed man got out of the car, and our trunk was scraped off the roof and carted away by a man in a stiff red cap--I would not see it again until my first life had ended, and my second had begun; and a few minutes later, eyelids still drooping, I found myself standing in the midst of a swarming crowd beside my mother and our remaining luggage, and suddenly startled by a leviathan that reared up before me--a great hunk of ship taller than a hill, a long stretch of hard blue steel it took my eyes several seconds to cover--and by a further awesome prospect of blue beyond it: the frail, dawning blue of a clear early morning sky, and beneath it a crisper blue, stretching smooth and picture still for as far as my eye could travel, the blue of the bay and the sea.

Despite the early hour the port was already alive with motion, blank-faced porters in red suits and stiff caps crisscrossing the pavement with trolleys and handcarts, mustached stevedores lounging at dockside on wooden crates or rolling loads into the ship's hold on small tractors with forked fronts, crooked-toothed vendors peddling baked chestnuts, *castagne*, and shouting, in their thick, rounded accents, *'Oh, castà! Cald' e sapori! Venite signò' e signò'! Castà!'* The porters and stevedores and vendors, though, had at least an air of propriety about them, seemed at home in the confusion they were a part of;

but amidst them moved a floating mass that seemed completely cut adrift, men in stiff dark suits and white shirts shouting at wives, women in bulging flowered dresses shouting at children, children in little Sunday outfits shouting at each other, rope-tied suitcases and overstuffed hand bags and lumpy burlap bags strewn all over the pier like ruins, whole families bedded down on the dirty pavement with bundled undershirts for pillows and thin coats for blankets, and the great collective wailing of a thousand agonized goodbyes, all along the mile-long pier the same tortured scene playing itself out, women and men alike crying and clutching their sea-bound relatives as if sending them off into the very bowels of hell.

'*Scusi, ma dove s'imbarca?*' My mother had come up behind a pale-khakied *carabiniere* who was leaning against a steel post, one thumb cocked under the strap of his rifle. Without looking over at my mother he made a vague gesture with his head and said, '*Di là, signò.*' But now he turned and noticed my mother's swollen belly, and after pausing for a moment to look my mother in the eye he leaned over and picked up her big green suitcase.

'*Vieni con me.*'

He led us down the pier, along the length of the great blue hulk that was parked there. Yard-high white letters spelled out a name along the ship's flank: SATURNIA. But I saw now that the ship's paint was splotched with spots of rust.

'What class?' the soldier said.

'Third.'

We stopped finally at the ship's stern, at the foot of a gang plank

crowded with boarding passengers.

'*Se ne va all' America la signora*,' the soldier said, drawling out the syllables.

'*Sí*,' my mother said. The soldier looked her up and down for a moment without speaking, his lips pursed as if he were assessing some problem, his head nodding slightly. He shifted the strap of his rifle.

'*Bè*,' he said finally. '*Buona fortuna*.' And after pausing another moment to turn up one side of his mouth in a half-smile, he turned and sauntered back down the pier, disappearing finally into the crowd.

'*Com' era prezioso quello*,' my mother said, staring after him. 'You'd think he could have at least carried our luggage up to the deck.'

But it was a long time before we had made our way up the gang plank, the line ahead of us, four or five feet abreast and tangled with bags and suitcases and bawling children, moving at a snail's pace. When we finally came up to the scuffed white floor of the deck, my own shoulder straining now from the bag I carried over it, my mother moved to the side of the line and collapsed on her big suitcase with a 'poof!' We saw now what had been holding the line up--the boarding area had been cordonned into a funnel, and up ahead two tired-looking young officers in blue uniforms and stiff blue caps were checking tickets and passports as passengers filed through a narrow gap in the ropes.

As my mother and I watched, a squabble broke out. While one of the officers inspected the papers of an old, grizzled man in a coarse black suit, a muffled cackle came up from the large covered hamper the man carried under one arm. The officer wearily but politely asked to look

inside the hamper; and when he moved aside its cover a dazed chicken stuck out its scrawny head. Calmly, the officer replaced the cover.

'*Scusi, signore*,' he said, in polished Italian, 'but it's not allowed to bring live animals aboard the ship without a special permit.'

But the old man did not seem to understand, and hugged the hamper obstinately to his breast. The officer explained again about regulations, and placing one hand on one of the hamper's handles and gesturing with the other towards the pier, suggested that the man try to sell the chicken to someone before embarking. The old man, though, perhaps understanding from the officer's gestures that he was not to be allowed to board, seemed to grow suddenly frightened, for now he tugged on his hamper and tried to make a dash through the narrow gap between the two officers; while the officer, taken by surprise by the man's sudden movement, tugged sharply on the handle he still held in an effort to restrain him. The hamper tore suddenly free from the old man's arm, and in a moment its contents were flying across the deck--grain, clothes, a loaf of bread, a provolone, and the scrawny-headed chicken, which wildly flapped its wings in a vain effort to remain airborne, sending up a flurry of downy feathers, until it crashed finally with a squawk to the deck and began racing between the legs of the oncoming passengers, its claws slipping and scraping against the deck's metal floor. Within a moment the whole deck was in an uproar, the officer and the old man madly chasing after the escaped chicken while women and children shrieked and shrank back from its wild flapping.

Beside me, though, my mother was laughing, laughing like I hadn't seen her laugh in months, tears coming to her eyes, a full-bellied laugh

that rolled through her like waves. She was still laughing when finally the chicken was caught and order was restored, the old man's hamper quickly repacked and he and his chicken escorted sternly down the gangway by the officer.

'Look at you!' my mother said, eyes still gleaming. 'Always so serious!' She made a face of exaggerated seriousness, eyes squinty, lips pouting, then burst into laughter again and hugged me towards her, pressing my face against her tear-stained cheek.

'*E scimunita tua mamma*,' she said, finally drawing away from me and bringing a palm up to wipe her tears. 'Come on, we'd better do our business and find our room, before they throw me off the boat for a madwoman.'

My mother heaved herself up from her suitcase, but as she stooped to pick it up a thick hand closed around its handle: a man in blue uniform and cap had leaned over the rope that held back the incoming passengers, and was directing dark eyes and a smile now at my mother. A gold insignia glinted at us from the front of his cap, held in place by a band of striped white and gold.

'Allow me,' he said, scooping off his cap with his free hand, to reveal a crop of short, dark hair flecked with grey. 'My name is Darchangelo. Antonio Darchangelo. I'm the third mate. May I carry la signora's luggage to her cabin?'

My mother hesitated.

'*Grazie*,' she said finally. *Tanto gentile*. But you don't show the same kindness to all the passengers.'

'Not all the passengers have quite as heavy a load as you do.'

The man lifted our suitcase over the cordon.

'Will your husband be coming aboard?' he said.

'No,' my mother said. 'He doesn't like to travel by sea.'

Officer Darchangelo gave my mother a sidelong glance but said nothing.

A moment later, on a nod from our new friend, the two guardians of the gate had let my mother and me pass unhindered through their portal.

'I'll have to check your papers,' Darchangelo said, when we rejoined him just past the barrier, and my mother reached into the bag she carried over her shoulder and pulled out her small green passport and the green plastic folders with our tickets. Darchangelo looked through the passport first.

'Issued 18 October 1956 in Campobasso,' he read. 'Molisana. I thought so, from the accent. Though you speak Italian very well for someone from those parts.'

'From those parts?' my mother said. 'Do you mean, for an illiterate peasant?'

Darchangelo's eyes darted up darkly from the passport, his tanned skin turning crimson.

'*Scusi*, I only meant--you see, I know very well the Italian they speak there. I come from Termoli.'

'Ah, Termoli,' my mother said, smiling. 'I hear they have beautiful beaches there.'

'Oh, yes,' Darchangelo said quickly, but then added, recovering, 'that is, if you like beaches. Actually, when I left home I was so sick of the sea that I wanted to get as far away from it as possible. So I

travelled all the way across the country, but before I knew it, there was the sea again. I couldn't get away from it. It was my—fate, I decided.'

Darchangelo handed back my mother's passport and glanced at our tickets.

'Number 409?' he said, surprised. 'But that's third class.'

'Yes,' my mother said. 'We were told this was the proper boarding place for third class.'

'Well, yes--but I would have thought you'd want at least a semi-private room. I mean, in your condition. Third class is worse than a hospital--you'll be with a dozen strangers and their screaming children. And you'll have to share a washroom with half the ship.'

'That's better than just sticking your backside over the rails,' my mother said.

For a second time, Darchangelo's face went red; but finally he laughed.

'*Bè*, we can't stand here holding up traffic all day,' he said, switching into dialect, and he led us now to a stairwell that went down into the ship, into the file of other passengers making their way there with their loads.

But when we had gone down a few steps, Darchangelo stopped.

'You know, I've just had an idea,' he said. 'We might have an extra cabin in second class. Two beds, one for you, one for your son. Private bath.'

'It's kind of you to be concerned,' my mother said, 'but I really can't afford that sort of luxury--'

'Oh, there won't be any question of expense. You see, the captain usually keeps a room open in second class for a friend, but I don't think his friend will be coming aboard this trip. Come, follow me.'

Still lugging my mother's suitcase, Darchangelo led us back up on deck and around to the starboard side of the ship. We walked past a large open deck lined with chairs of dirty white canvas, then down a wide aisle flanked on one side by grey doors and small curtained windows and on the other by the rails and the bay, which from this close looked not blue but a murky green. Finally we ascended a stairwell of unpainted metal that led to an upper deck which extended about half the length of a ship; up here the aisle, lined with a long row of small white boats whose paint was cracked and blistered, was bustling with uniformed crew members. Darchangelo led us towards the ship's bow, and stopped at a door on which '*Capitano*' was stencilled in black cursive script. He knocked.

'*Avanti.*'

The room we stepped into was windowless and dim; it had a faded, slightly tawdry opulence about it, like the throne room of a king in exile, the carpet a thick brown but worn in patches, the chairs heavy and leather-upholstered but glossy from use, the dark wood panelling warping from the wall in long, undulating waves. Behind a huge, ornately carved wooden desk sat a balding, greying man with wind-burnt skin and heavy jowls, a large chart spread out before him. He squinted as we came in, as if the sudden light from the doorway had caused him discomfort, then brought a hand up to rub some pain in the back of his neck. He had on the same blue uniform as Darchangelo, except that a double row

of gold buttons ran down the front of his jacket and four gold stripes circled his cuffs to Darchangelo's two.

'What is it, Darchangelo,' he said, in a voice more tired than gruff; but he surveyed my mother and me through narrowed eyes, as if we might be stowaways the third mate had discovered in the hold, among the olives and provolone. 'Any problem?'

'Captain,' Darchangelo said, looking not at the captain but at a point somewhere above his head, 'this good woman has tickets for third class. I thought, however, that in her condition she might do with a little privacy. I've suggested we put her in 213.'

'213? But my wife--' Then, as some private thought entered the captain's head, he raised his brows and brought a hand up to scratch his grizzled chin. 'Hmm. Yes, Darchangelo, I see your point. What room are you in now, Mrs.--?'

'Innocente. Room 409. I appreciate all this trouble, captain, but I'm sure I could manage--'

'409? That's below the water line. Sometimes its an inferno down there. Too close to the boilers. La signora is travelling alone?'

'As you can see I'm travelling with my son.'

'Of course; I was referring to your husband.'

'My husband is waiting for me at the other end,' my mother said. 'He's been in Canada a few years now.'

'Oh?' The captain's eyes shifted to my mother's belly. 'But you've seen him recently?'

'He comes and goes.'

'Hm. I see. And he knows, I take it, about the little surprise

you're bringing with you?'

'Oh, yes,' my mother said, smiling. 'But I'm sure it was a surprise.'

The captain cleared his throat.

'How long, ah, Mrs. Innocente, before the baby is due?'

'Five weeks, six--it's hard to say. With Vittorio I was three weeks late. Maybe this time I'll be three weeks early. I hope you have a midwife on board. Or a good doctor.'

'Oh, yes, we have a doctor all right," he said, stroking his chin, distracted; but then, suddenly peremptory: 'Well, perhaps we'll meet again during the voyage. All right, Darchangelo, give them 213. The key is with the steward. Good day, Mrs. Innocente, and a pleasant trip. Officer Darchangelo will be glad to help you with anything you need.'

Room 213, I'm sure, had little to recommend it--La Saturnia, after all, was no luxury liner: it likely earned its bread and butter, in those days before airplanes had become the standard means of crossing oceans, from the pockets of poor immigrants arriving in the New World with little more to their names than their suitcases. But to me that little room, with its double-portholed view of the sea, its armchairs of faded chintz, its formica-topped coffee table, its army issue steel-framed bunks, its shaded lights, became a symbol of change, of the new dimensions life could take on outside Valle del Sole. On one wall hung a heavy-framed painting of St. Christopher, in rich oils thick as paste, a strong current frothing white at the saint's thighs, a pink-skinned diapered Christ perched on his shoulder and bearing a small globe of bright blue and green in one hand. And in the bathroom, polished

porcelain and chrome gleamed under the white clarity of electric lights: here was a toilet you could sit on and a chain that sent a rush of water swirling into the toilet's bowl when you pulled on it, and over the sink silver taps that sent hot and cold water gurgling onto your hands at command.

'*Mamma, guarda*,' I said, pulling the shower curtain aside so I could show her how the water rumbled down from the tub's faucet; but as she came into the bathroom I discovered a small sliding knob above the faucet, and a moment later found myself drenched by a stream of water coming from above my head.

'*Ma che ruffiano*,' my mother said, pulling me away from the tub and draping a white towel over my head. Her fingers rubbed into my scalp through the cloth. 'For the next ten days you're going to get more water than you'll know what to do with. *Acqua, acqua, d'appertutto*, for as far as you can see. When you get to America you won't want to see another drop of water for seven years and seven days.'

When she had dried me my mother undid the top buttons of her dress and washed herself quickly at the sink, passing a wash cloth around her neck. Then she hustled me out of the bathroom and closed the door behind me.

'I'll be through in a minute,' she said, 'and then we'll go upstairs to watch the ship leave the port.'

But a few minutes later, while I stood on a chair staring out one of the portholes at a large black ship just heaving into port, a crowd of little dinghies bobbing precariously in its wake, someone pounded on the door, hard and frantic.

'*Apri! Senti!* Open up, I know you're in there!'

It was a woman's voice, shrill and angry. My mother emerged from the bathroom now, and gave me a puzzled look.

'*Ma chi è questa*? There must be some mistake.'

More pounding.

'Open up, I know who you are! Open up so I can see your face! So I can see what the face of a whore looks like!'

'This woman is mad,' my mother said, blanching a little; but she walked over to the door now, and pulled it open. Behind it stood a chunky, short-haired older women in a too-tight blue and green print dress, face flushed red with anger and thick hands perched defiantly on burgeoning hips. But the moment she saw my mother her face went suddenly white and she clapped her hands together before her.

'*Madonna!*' she cried. 'She's pregnant! *Madonna che figura ha fatto!* It's his child, isn't it? Oh, *dio mio*, it's come to this!' Then, catching sight of me hovering near my mother's side, she let out a little shriek. '*Un altro! Dio autami!*' And, on the verge, it seemed, of collapsing, she pushed passed my mother and me and fell heavily into one of the room's armchairs, huge chest heaving. '*Non pensavo mai! Due figli! Che figura!*'

'*Scusi*,' my mother said cautiously, '*ma chi è Lei*?'

But the woman let out a long, mournful wail.

'What does it matter, who I am? *Nessuno*. I am no one. I came here to kill both of you but now I see how things are! *Due figli!* And four at home who never see his face! *Non posso, non posso, non posso piu continuare cosi*. I'll kill myself.' And she pulled a

handkerchief out from between her breasts and blew loudly into it, then broke finally into heaving sobs. 'Trent' anni! Thirty years I've worked like a slave for him!'

But now my mother, a sudden illumination changing her expression from confusion to calm condolence, knelt down beside the woman and put a hand on her arm.

'*Calmati*,' she said gently. '*Ha sbagliato*. I'm not the one you're looking for.'

'*Ma come, che dici*?' the woman said, chest still heaving. 'It's this room, it's always this room. When the cook's wife told me I didn't believe her, I thought it was *invidia*, because her own husband has been running around with a little tramp. But then I found the key in his pocket once, room 213, just like she said--ten years! Ten years this has been going on, and no one told me a word. If you knew what I have to put up with--' but she broke into sobs again.

'*Scusi, signora*,' my mother started again. 'We've both been tricked. I'm not the woman you're looking for. They put me here to confuse you. The captain's friend isn't coming aboard this trip; the third mate told me so himself. I don't know anything else about it, except that they tried to make fools out of both of us.'

Something in my mother's tone seemed to calm the woman, because now she looked over at her with new attention, sobs subsiding to panting heaves.

'*Ma è vero*?' she said, daubing at her eyes. 'You're not trying to make fun of me?'

'*Sì, è vero*.'

'And the children?'

'Whoever they belong to, it's not your husband.'

The woman looked now from my mother's face to mine, back to my mother's, then let out a great sob of relief.

'Oh, thank God!' She clasped thick arms around my mother's neck and burst into tears again. 'Ah, *meno male, meno male! Grazie, signora, grazie*, you don't know what a burden you've taken off of me! *Be*, you can imagine when I came in here and saw you bloated up like a whale, and then the little boy, his eyes are just like my husband's, I was certain--'

But a foghorn sounded now somewhere above the deck, and the floor beneath us began to tremble like a huge stomach growling.

'*Scusi, signora*, but I think they're starting the engines,' my mother said. 'If you don't want to follow us to Canada, you'd better get off the ship.'

'*Sì, sì, grazie*. I hope you'll excuse me for the way I lost my head but you can imagine how a woman feels--'

'*Sbrigati*,' my mother said, helping the woman to the door. 'If I have a chance I'll have a few words with him for you.'

'*Grazie, signora, grazie tanto*,' backing out the door and clasping my mother's hand; but a minute later, as she receded down the hall, she was cursing again. '*L'ammazzo*! I'll kill him! I'll kill them both! I'll break his balls!'

'*Addio*,' my mother mumbled, watching her go. '*Poveretta*.' But a smile was playing around the corners of her lips. 'Well, at least we got this room out of it, eh Vittorio? *Andiamo*, let's go say

goodbye to Italia.'

Up on deck the last passengers were still scrambling up the gangway, suitcases and bags littering the boarding area while everyone flocked to the rails to wave their final goodbyes. The rails all along the port side were lined three thick with people exchanging shouts with friends and relatives left behind on the pier or simply casting their goodbyes to the wind, *addio Italia, salve America!* My mother managed to squeeze through and get us a place against the rail just as the ship was churning away from its moorings, the crowd on the pier still shouting last minute instructions or warnings to their departing loved ones. 'Say hello to President Eisenhower!' 'Tell Giovanni the army is looking for him!' 'Send me back an American woman!' 'Tell your father when I get my hands on him, I'll break his balls!' No confetti or balloons or champagne, but enough noise to raise the dead. Then, amidst the noise, I made out a boyish shout of 'Ho, Vittò!' and my eyes scanned they crowd until they lighted on a familiar face peering out from the shadows of a corduroy cap, and my hand shot up to wave. But when the cap came up to return the gesture, it revealed not a boy but a small, ancient man with a wrinkled face and blackened teeth.

'Who were you waving to?' my mother said.

But I only shrugged, embarrassed.

As the gap between the rails and the dock widened, the ship's horn boomed above us, drowning out the shouts from the shore, and slowly the ship, like a great tired whale, pulled back into the waters of the bay and then began to turn its nose to the sea. The people on the pier had become a single undulating mass now, shouts died down to silent waves,

and as they faded away I felt a tremendous relief, as if all that could ever cause pain or do harm was being left behind on the shore that was now receding from me; and even in my small, confused head a thousand small clues--a strange letter my mother had received before leaving for Rome; the last argument she had had with my grandfather; the date that Antonio Darchangelo had read from her passport--had begun to take form now into the dim outlines of a possibility, the possibility that no angry, dark-haired man would be waiting for us on the other shore, and that my mother and I would melt into an endless freedom as broad and as blue as the sea.

My mother and I stood at the rails until most of the crowd around us had filtered away, our hair blown back by a stiff, briny wind. We did not go down to our room again until the bay of Naples was no larger than a cup you could hold in the palm of your hand, and we were on the open sea.

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XXXV—PHOTOGRAPHS

Isn't there a way the sea filters in through your pores, gets into your blood; isn't coming to the sea always like coming home, every tear you shed always a longing to return to the sea? The sea started us off, in the first days of creation, and our genes, who remember everything, still look back to the sea as mother and bride.

What do I remember from that ocean voyage? Here is a picture of my
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mother lying supine in a canvas deck chair, an unseasonably warm day somewhere off Cadiz, where we'd docked a few hours to pick up oranges. My mother in shirt sleeves and the down on her arms caught in the soft waves of an ocean breeze, giving off golden glimmers where it catches the sun, her belly meloning beneath the folds of her silken blouse. Here is another shot of her at poolside with third mate Antonio Darchangelo, the two of them great friends now after a little initial rancour, both of them laughing though Antonio a little flushed because my mother has just said, 'Why is it that all the handsome men go out to sea?' And here's one of a woman with her back to the camera, standing at the rail of a large ocean liner, her hand on the shoulder of a boy of seven or eight, the two of them, mother and child, staring east, towards Italy or the Orient, but seeing only the miles of ocean which stretch, for all they know or care, to the ends of the earth.

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XXXVI--AN INVITATION

Around seven on the evening of 21 March 1957, at the end of a cool, blue day, my mother and I just preparing to go down to supper in the second-and-third class cafeteria, Antonio Darchangelo knocked on the door of cabin 213. Antonio had apologized profusely about the incident with the woman in Naples, claimed ignorance, sent a box of chocolates down from the gift shop; and since then he and my mother had been spending much time together, enough that I had begun to notice the accusing

whispers and glances of fellow passengers. Antonio often slipped away from his rounds to join my mother and me on the ship's outdoor terrace--the weather had continued unseasonably warm, each day dawning crisp blue and cloudless--regaling us with gifts of sweets and ices or coming to alert us when a school of porpoises or whales had been spotted frolicking nearby. Sometimes he skipped his own officer's meals to join us in the cafeteria, making sure that a special piece of dessert was brought down for me from first class.

With me Antonio always showed great deference, acknowledging my position as the primary male in my mother's life, and taking pleasure in my company--a few times he took me along with him on his rounds, up to the ship's bridge, where the captain stood red-faced over his charts and controls, hands in his pockets, eyes on the sea; down to the ship's bowels, where the air stank of steam and huge pipes ran overhead and great shafts pounded and churned, sweating men in grey overalls watching over gauges and fiddling with valves. My mother came down with us once, despite the protests of Antonio, who said it was against regulations for a woman to go below, 'and in your condition'--but her visit, despite the temporary confusion it caused wherever she passed, was certainly popular with the workers. And under Antonio's attentions my mother seemed to have become her old self again, her young self, her cheeks full of colour, her eyes always laughing, as if the radiance of sun and the blue of sky and ocean had seeped into her, made her crisp and new. It seemed also that there was something gentler about her now than in the past, a greater maturity, though perhaps it was only that her impending maternity had dissolved her sharper contours into an almost fluid softness.

This evening, Antonio had come to our door with an invitation.

'The captain would like to know if la signora and her son would join him at his table this evening.'

My mother raised her brows.

'To what do we owe this honour?'

Antonio cleared his throat.

'The captain wishes to make amends--for the little incident which occurred at Naples.'

'I see,' my mother said. 'And was this little gesture entirely the captain's idea?'

'Well,' Antonio faltered, 'I may have dropped a word or two--'

'And did you also tell the captain what I thought about his little joke?'

'Cristina, I beg you not to say anything embarrassing to him, for my sake.'

'Well, we'll see how he behaves himself, but I won't promise anything. What time do we eat?'

'Eight o'clock. I'll call for you then.'

'Eight o'clock? But we were just on our way to supper now. What do you think, Vittorio, can we wait for another hour?'

I shrugged.

'*Bè*, I can see you're lying. You want to find out if captains eat regular food like the rest of us. *Va bene*, Andò, we'll be ready at eight.'

My mother helped me change into a new suit she'd bought me in Rocca Secca just before our departure, and then the two of us sat down in the

room's armchairs to wait, my mother leafing through a magazine while I just fidgeted, pulling at my tight collar, excited at the prospect of eating with the captain but also bored, the minutes dropping away like little toothpicks dropped into the ship's wake, a long crooked line of them, ten, fifteen, twenty. Then, to pass the time, I pulled out of the cabin's closet the bag that contained most of my worldly goods and began to set them out on the coffee table in front of me--the book from la maestra, the medals from my grandfather, the knife from Fabrizio. Finally I reached into my pocket and pulled out my lucky coin. But the thrill of seeing all my prizes laid out before me was somewhat less than I'd expected, and as a last measure I opened the case that held my grandfather's medals and spread each of them out individually on the table's marbled surface.

'*Ma che fai*,' my mother said absently from behind her magazine. But when she looked over at the table her eyes fell immediately on the medals, and from the flush that came to her face I knew I had made a mistake.

'Where did you get those medals from?' she said, voice tinged with irritation.

'*Nonno* gave them me.'

'He gave them to you?' She paused, leaned over and picked up the blue-moired *medaglio militare*, held it dangling from her fingers. 'What did he say to you?'

But I was saved, now, by Antonio's knock, and I quickly scooped my gifts off the table; and by the time we returned from the captain's my mother had either forgotten the matter, or chosen to let it lie.

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XXXVII --TEMPEST

The captain's quarters were on the upper deck, just down from his office, and were furnished in the same faded elegance--dark panelling on the walls (no windows), heavy wood furnishings, old velvet upholstery, thick carpeting. To the right of the room two long couches and several armchairs were grouped around a coffee table; to the right, a long, white-clothed dining table sat under a gold and glass chandelier. Most of the chairs were filled when we arrived; as we entered everyone rose in unison to offer greetings. The captain stood at the table's head--I noticed, on the wall to the right of him, several pictures of children, all with the same heavy-jowled faces as he, and in the centre of them a woman who looked like a younger, prettier version of the woman who had barged into room 213 in Naples. The captain made introductions with a slow sweep of his arm; there were twelve or thirteen of us in all, my mother the only woman, most of the other guests dressed in officer's uniforms, crew cut and tight-collared and blue-jacketed, almost indistinguishable from each other. One guest, however, stood out from the rest, a corpulent man with thin, greasy hair and a network of broken vessels on his plump cheeks, and dressed completely in white, from the tips of his collar to the toes of his shoes.

'*Il dottore Cosabene*,' the captain introduced him, 'who tends to the ship's sick and dying. Which means he usually has nothing to do.'

'*Piacere*,' said the doctor, extending thick fingers to take my mother's hand and bring it to his lips. But my mother pulled her hand away quickly, and answered the doctor's courtesy with only a sour smile.

The table had been set with brilliant white china and gleaming silverware, napkins of rich red cloth billowing from the mouths of wine glasses like exotic flowers, bottles of red wine set out like columns along the table's long white expanse. Each setting had a three-tiered arrangement of dishes, a large plate at the bottom, a soup bowl, and finally a small antipasto dish laid out with bits of celery and carrot, black olives, slices of prosciutto and provolone.

We took our places, and the captain bowed his head briefly in grace, the officers and Dr. Cosabene following suit; and not until the captain had looked up and said, 'Buon appetitio,' did anyone touch a morsel of food, and then the captain's guests fell to as if a spring had suddenly been released in them, spreading napkins on their knees and bearing down silently on the small morsels of food before them. My mother, though, held back, staring for a moment from face to silent face as if waiting for her own cue to begin. Stewards, meanwhile, invisible as ghosts in their white serving jackets, had come into the room with steaming white bowls and covered silver trays, which they set on a trolley at the side of the room, while one of them worked his way around the table uncorking bottles and filling glasses.

'*Grazie*,' my mother said, when her glass had been filled. 'Maybe you can get some *gazzosa* for Vittorio.' Then finally she reached out for a roll, cracked it in half over her dish, and stuffed a piece of prosciutto into it with her fingers. She handed the roll to me, then made another roll for herself, while the others continued eating in silence. She took a bite, chewed, swallowed, then raised her glass with a little 'Cin cin,' and brought it to her lips. A hurried

chorus of 'ci n ci ns' went up around the table.

'Captain,' my mother said, setting down her glass and taking another bite of her *pannino*. For a split second all the chewing in the room stopped, then started up again too quickly. 'Is it forbidden to talk at your table.'

The captain looked over at my mother and smiled.

'Forbidden? No, not at all. I merely like to observe a little formality. It's one of the few privileges left to a captain.' He paused, and took a sip of wine. 'Once upon a time a captain had absolute power at sea. Now everywhere he turns he finds a union. These little rituals are all we have left.'

My mother took an olive in her mouth.

'And at home?' she said.

Antonio, sitting beside her, put his fork down and brought his napkin to his lips.

'*Scusi*?' the captain said.

'At home. Does a captain still have absolute power at home?'

A laugh went up around the table. The captain smiled. Antonio put his napkin down.

'*Ma certe*,' the captain said amiably. 'At least until wives have unions.' More laughter.

'Tell me this,' my mother persisted, all the while cleaning up the contents of her antipasto dish, 'doesn't it worry you to spend so much time at sea? What do you think your wife does when you leave her alone like that? Even a woman has an itch she needs to scratch once in a while.'

Another round of laughter: but this one died away awkwardly--the captain was not laughing.

'What she does is her own affair,' he said gruffly, and as if the matter was closed he turned back to his plate.

'I see,' my mother said, 'but I also see that your children'--she gestured towards the photos on the wall with a tilt of her head--'all have your features. Perhaps for that you should be grateful.'

A quiet pause followed, and the tension in the room thickened; but finally the captain gave a little laugh and smiled.

'You have won your point, signora,' he said. 'I've already been accused of being a tyrant. I won't be accused of being a poor sport.' He raised his wine glass towards my mother. '*Ti saluto*. You drive a hard bargain.'

With this gesture the tension in the room seemed to break, and now slowly conversation began to flow more freely. While the antipasto dishes were being cleared away and the soup was being served it built up gradually to a steady drone, some of the officers politely requesting permission from my mother to remove their jackets, empty wine bottles starting to accumulate on the serving trolley; and by the pasta course, the white-jacketed stewards filling glasses now with a heady regularity, and the crewcut officers, dispensing with apologies, loosening their collars and rolling up their sleeves, it swelled finally to a full-fledged torrent, punctuated by peals of laughter and back-slapping good humour, everyone caught up, it seemed, in a mood of Saturnalian revelry. On a nod from the captain, more bottles of wine were brought up by the stewards, to be quickly uncorked and poured; though the doctor, sitting

in his white-suited corpulence, could not be bothered even to wait for the stewards to fill his glass, and so kept a bottle at his elbow for ready service. Even my *gazzosa* had somehow turned a fine rosé, like water tinged with drops of blood, and every time I reached for my glass the colour seemed to have deepened, so that soon a fine mist had got itself between my eyes and my brain and the room had begun revolving slowly, like a great globe spinning idly on its axis. The captain, too, lost some of his polite restraint, his tired eyes taking on some of the wine's sparkle; though his glass sat longer than most between sips.

Dr. Cosabene, sitting across from my mother and me, had been trying to edge himself into my mother's conversation since antipasto; but until the end of the pasta course my mother had successfully ignored him, keeping up a steady dialogue with Antonio and some of the other officers. Then, as the stewards were dishing out the veal and vegetables, an opening occurred, and the doctor slipped into it.

'*Scusi, signora, ma da quale parte d'Italia viene*?'

My mother looked across at the doctor, picked up her napkin, wiped her lips.

'You have a spot of sauce on your chin,' she said, smiling, and the officers around her laughed. The doctor blushed, then wiped quickly at his chin with his napkin, finding finally the crooked line of sauce that had dribbled down from the corner of his mouth.

'I was born at Caserta,' my mother said finally, 'the daughter of the king. But my mother gave me to the gypsies, to save me from the Republicans.'

'Ha, ha,' laughed the doctor. 'And now, no doubt, you're running to

Ameri ca to save yoursel f from the gypsi es.'

'Something like that.'

'Tell me signora, if I may ask a personal question, how long before you delivér the little parcel in your lap? I ask, of course, out of professional interest, as a postmaster to a postman, so to speak.'

'Who can say,' my mother said, shrugging. 'You know how the Italian mails are.'

'Ha, yes, very good. But only three months ago, you see, I delivered a baby on this ship. A Calabrese woman. Two weeks early--the motion of the ship, you know. The water broke, and plop! The baby, unfortunately, was stillborn....*Scusi*, signora, I didn't mean to upset you, but I wonder why a woman in your state would travel? Why not wait another month or two, and have the baby at home?'

'Sometimes it's easier to carry a baby in your stomach than in your arms.'

'Ha, ha, you may have something there, it's true. But still, it must be a strain--you're in your last month, no?'

'What a lot of questions you ask, doctor. Perhaps at one time you were a priest?'

'Ho, ho, oh no, never a priest! Not even an altar boy--I'm much too honest for that kind of work. Though after all we work together, they take over where I fail, heh, heh.'

But my mother turned abruptly now to her veal, and the interchange ended.

A few minutes later, though, our feast was interrupted. A boyish crewman, face grave and guilty, sailor's cap clutched in his white-

knuckled hand, came in with a message for the captain.

'I'm sorry to disturb your meal sir. The first mate sent me down, sir.'

'Yes, what is it.'

'There's a storm, sir, we just had a wire from the Vulcania. The first mate thought you should have a look. Sir.'

'All right,' the captain said, fatigue creeping back into his eyes. 'Tell him I'll be up in a minute.'

The captain got up slowly and addressed the table.

'The rest of you have ten minutes to get to your posts. We may have a long night ahead of us. Signora, you'll excuse the interruption; perhaps we'll have a chance to dine together again before the trip is through. Darchangelo will see you to your room after you've had your coffee and dessert.'

Conversation died down quickly now. One by one the officers took their leave, offering apologies and *piaceri* and *buone notti* to my mother, and in ten minutes only the doctor, Antonio, and my mother and I remained, and the stewards had begun to clear away the table. The doctor was still working on a bottle of wine that sat in front of him, and when one of the stewards reached for it, the doctor made a sudden move to stop him, and the bottle toppled forward towards my mother. My mother quickly pushed herself back from the table; but before she could get clear, a bright stream of red had spilled into her lap.

'*Addio*!' she said, rising abruptly. The steward hurried over mumbling apologies, and began wiping at my mother's dress with a napkin.

'Watch where you put your hands,' the doctor said. 'After all, the

lady is pregnant.'

The steward, suddenly mortified, blushed crimson and abruptly ceased his wiping.

'Oh, *scusi*, signora! I didn't mean--'

'It's all right,' my mother said, taking the napkin from him. 'The doctor is having his little joke.'

'I was merely thinking of la signora's health,' said the doctor.

Dr. Cosabene stood now and from the other end of the table picked up a wine bottle that still had most of its contents intact. Then, glass of wine in one hand and bottle in the other, he walked unsteadily across the room and slowly eased himself onto one of the captain's couches.

'I remember,' he was saying, 'a storm in '33 that came out of the sky just like that, one minute it was blue and the next black as night, and this on an old ship that was left over from Roman times. We had to tie ourselves to the deck so we wouldn't get washed overboard.... Nowadays on these big ships you could sleep through a storm and never notice a thing...'

'We'd better go,' Antonio said, taking my mother's arm. 'The storm will be hitting soon, and anyway you'll want to get out of that dress. And the doctor, you can see, does not make a very pleasant after-dinner partner. *Buona notte, dottore.*'

'Eh?.... *Ma e presto ancora, dove andate*? Stay and have another small glass. No? *Bĕ, va bene, allora, buona notte. 'E buon viaggio alla signora!* Let's hope that--' But we were already out the door.

'Look, you can already see the clouds up ahead,' Antonio said. He pointed to a patch of sky towards the horizon where the stars seemed

suddenly to end. 'It looks like we're going to run right into the middle of it.' But beyond the railings the water seemed calm and still in the moonlight: only the waves from the ship's movement were disturbing its surface.

'Should we put on our life jackets?' my mother said.

But Antonio had become suddenly serious.

'There's no danger, really,' he said. 'All the same, it's not any fun to pass through these things. This is an old ship, all we have to control the rolling are tanks, and they're not nearly as good as the fins on the newer ships.'

'You worry about the tanks and fins,' my mother said. 'I just want to know if I can get a good night's sleep.'

'Keep a bucket by your bed,' Antonio said.

At the door to our cabin, Antonio paused for a moment.

'Cristina, I don't want you to leave your room during the storm. In your condition--'

'Yes, yes, I'm tired of hearing about my condition. I'm not sick, I'm pregnant.' My mother had carried away an orange from the captain's table; she touched it now to Antonio's nose, then pushed him gently away from the doorway. 'Go, I'll be fine. Go play with your toys, like a good boy.'

The portholes in cabin 213 were about ten or twelve feet above the water line; but the sea had been so calm thus far during our voyage that the water had always looked very far away when I'd peered through them. Now, though, when I looked out, while my mother slipped out of her wine-stained dress and into the shower, the waves had begun to edge their way

up the side of the ship, the surface of the sea grown choppy, sending up glints of reflected moonlight like secret signals. Then, with a suddenness that sent thrills through me--no more than five or ten minutes could have passed--the waves began to swell higher and higher, began to lap up against the porthole I was staring out of, and the reflected light of the moon and stars quickly drained away, as if a canopy had just been drawn over the sky. In the blackness only the thousand little bulbs of decklights and other portholes shone out now; I could make out only the frothy tips of the waves that had started slashing against the ship's side, though the wall was trembling from the force of them. Heavy drops had begun to pelt against the glass, mixing there with wet from the waves, and by the time my mother had stepped out of the shower the windows had become a steady wash of rain and sea. Every few seconds a little tremor passed through the wall and floor, and the orange my mother had placed on the coffee table had begun to rock gently back and forth, a small nudge to the left, pause, a small nudge to the right. The dizziness I still felt in my head from the wine was giving way to a new dizziness, one that started in the pit of my stomach.

'I think the storm has hit,' my mother said, coming out of the bathroom in her nightgown. 'All that wonderful supper is going to go to waste.' Holding the frame of the bunk bed for support she lowered herself, legs apart, onto the lower bunk. But as her seat touched the mattress she drew in her breath sharply and grimaced.

'*Addio*,' she said. 'Now my back is starting to go. I'll be glad to get this extra weight off of it.'

I abandoned my place at the window now; the chair beneath my feet

had begun to feel very unsteady.

'Mamma,' I said, 'I feel sick.'

Darchangelo had spoken of tanks and fins. But he had not mentioned how on a rough, irregular sea a captain could lose control of a ship's roll: because in the thousand different waves striking the ship's hull from a thousand different angles, there would always be one wave, no matter how much the captain tried to steer clear of it by veering to port or to starboard, which would strike the hull at the precise moment when the ship had come to the end of a roll, and was beginning another; so that as if out of some death instinct the ship would begin to pick its own pattern out of the waves, responding, like a pendulum, only to those which would nudge it a little farther in its rolling, the rolls by steady degrees growing sharper and steeper, until finally the mariners were clinging to the masts for dear life, and the rails were dipping into the sea. Now, while the sea continued to boil outside the port-holes, the floor beneath us began to list, to the left, pause, to the right, until the rolls grew so steep it was impossible to stand upright without some handhold for support; and as the ship leaned and listed in the storm my mother and I began finally to empty our suppers into the cabin's toilet, course by course, until our cabin reeked with the smell of vomit.

I had given up crawling up and down the little metal ladder that led up to my bunk and now sat in my pyjamas, which were flecked with vomit, on the bathroom floor, one hand clutched to the door frame for support and the other to my stomach, my bare feet gripping the floor to keep my body from sliding with the ship's rolls. The bathroom light was

flickering on and off like lightning; my head swam with dizziness and fatigue, and a low continuous moan was coming up from my throat. At the back of my head I was conscious of my mother's orange still rolling back and forth on the coffee table to the rhythm of the ship's roll, like a metronome keeping time, and in the pause at the end of each roll a part of me tensed in expectation, waiting for the orange to exceed its bounds finally and drop, with a thud, to the carpeted floor.

Every ten minutes or so my mother lurched through the bathroom doorway, hair flailing, hands scrambling for supports, and eased herself down in front of the toilet. Then, one hand clutching some pain in her back, she waited with her head over the bowl until her body began to retch. And retch it did, with a violence that frightened me: in the flickering light, hair tangled and knotted, body jerking like a whip with each heave, she looked like a wild animal howling on top of a hill in a storm.

By her third or fourth visit, though, she seemed to have coughed up the dregs of her supper, because her heaves were coming up dry. Between heaves now her breathing was shallow and quick, and when her body convulsed she'd throw her head back with a groan, as if a tremendous pain were passing up her spine. Finally her visits to the toilet stopped altogether; though from where I sat I heard her shallow breathing through the doorway, and every five minutes or so a short pause followed by a groan. I began to forget about the churning in my own stomach--I had not thrown up for some time now, and my body was growing accustomed to the rhythmic roll of the ship. The orange, by now, had fallen off the table and was bumping irregularly against table and chair legs; but

a light, rhythmic scraping sound had replaced the orange as timekeeper, and I pulled myself around the bathroom door frame to see the painting of St. Christopher tilting slowly back and forth against the cabin wall. But it was the wall, of course, which was tilting from the ship's roll--St. Christopher himself remained steady, like a centre of gravity, the little Jesus on his shoulder still holding his globe upright and safe, no danger of him toppling with his load into the frothy current.

Now the time between my mother's groans seemed to be lessening. Only a few thin inches of bathroom wall separated my head from her own, and each time she groaned the wall between us seemed to tremble, as if a great wave chain was striking the ship in tandem with her groans. I had no reason now to keep up my post on the bathroom floor, but still I huddled there, counting the number of times the ship rolled between each of my mother's groans, now twenty-five, now twenty-three, now twenty. She was mumbling curses to herself between groans, and other words I couldn't make out. I had an image of what she looked like stretched out on her bunk, belly sticking up like a globe, hair tangled and matted on her pillow, head rocking back and forth in delirium; but I did not have the courage to go into the cabin to confirm it.

But the groans grew longer and more frequent, like the creak of a great branch slowly breaking beneath the weight of a storm; and finally my mother called out to me. I scrambled up and lurched into the cabin, and saw my mother as I had imagined her, except that her knees were up and her hands were above her head, wrapped around her bed posts. She looked over at me with eyes that seemed on the verge of tears; then another pain passed through her and she squeezed her eyes shut,

clenching her hands more tightly around the bed posts.

'Oh, *dio*,' she said finally, when the pain had passed, 'I would have died before I let that man lay a hand on me. I wish we could do it just the two of us.'

She smiled weakly, but tears had formed in the corners of her eyes. I stood before her uncomprehending, clutching a bed post for support; my eyes darted nervously from her face to her swollen belly.

'It's not the pain,' she said, seeing the movement of my eyes. 'The pain is nothing--' But she squeezed her eyes shut again as another spasm passed through her.

'Vittorio,' she said, wiping at her eyes with the back of a hand, 'there's nothing for it. You'll have to go for the doctor. I think his room is on the main deck...next to the infirmary. Make sure you hold onto the railings. And don't go outside, whatever you do. Tell the doctor...the pains are only a few minutes apart.'

I stood irresolutely for a moment.

'Go on,' she said, then squeezed her eyes shut again and groaned. I was already moving towards the door when the spasm passed.

'Put on some shoes,' my mother called weakly; but I was out the door now, weaving unsteadily towards the stairwell, bare feet chafing against the carpeted floor.

XXXVIII--IN THE JAWS OF DEATH

On the main deck, I found a door with the doctor's name painted on it in black; but though I knocked and waited, waited and knocked, the doctor did not appear. Finally I tried the handle; but the door was locked. I stood for a moment in indecision and despair. The lights here were not flickering as they were in our bathroom, but the halls were deserted; it seemed that in the bad weather even the maintenance staff had kept to their rooms--I had had to step over two pools of vomit on my way up to the main deck. Only steady groan of the ship and the tumble and creak of loose objects rolling and shifting behind closed doors broke the silence.

But just as I was on the verge of returning to my mother I heard a low moan from down the hall. It had come from the infirmary, whose door was propped open with a little rubber wedge, though the lights inside were off. I stuck my head cautiously inside, into a small reception room with a few upholstered chairs and a large metal desk. This room gave onto another, beyond a partition of frosted glass, its door also propped open; inside, from the dim light filtering in from the hall, I made out about a dozen beds, high and tubular-framed, each of them tilting precariously with the ship's roll, straining against the bolts which held them to the floor, and each of them standing crisp white and undisturbed except one, on which lay a small woman in nurse's bonnet and uniform and white nylons, stomach pressed to the mattress, arms hanging limp over the sides of the bed, and face to the wall. A pair of white shoes lay on the floor beyond the foot of the bed, as if kicked off

haphazardly.

'*Scusi*,' I said weakly from the doorway; but the woman did not turn towards me, and I got only a groan in reply.

'*Scusi*,' I repeated. 'My mother's sick.'

'Everybody's sick,' the woman said finally, voice slurred and muffled by her pillow; though still she did not turn to face me. She moaned again, then brought one foot up to scratch her calf, her toe hissing like static against her nylons.

'My mother told me to get the doctor,' I said.

'Everybody's sick,' the nurse moaned again. 'Even the doctor's sick. I haven't seen him all night. He's probably throwing up in a closet somewhere, like everybody else.'

I stood uncertainly for a moment, hands clutching the door frame.

'She said the pains are only a few minutes away.'

'She's lucky,' the nurse said. 'Mine are here right now.'

But I'd remembered now where I'd seen the doctor last, stretched out like a beached whale on one of the couches in the captain's quarters; and without another word to the nurse I lurched back into the hall and towards the door that led onto the deck.

I knew only the one way to get to the upper deck, by the outdoor stairwell. The ship was still rolling steeply, but till now I'd felt the storm only as this roll, for all the rain and sea I'd seen lashing at the portholes, a roll which by now had begun to seem fairly calm and steady, lulling almost, not the wild fury of a storm at sea. The small round windows on the double doors that led out to the deck were thick with rain, but they were too high for me to look through; and so,

preparing myself simply for the prospect of being drenched, I pushed down on one of the round bars that released the doors' catches, and shoved.

The door, though, wouldn't budge--a hundred muscled men might have been on the other side holding it shut, so firmly did it resist my thrust. I tightened my foot grip and shoved again, then again, harder, until I felt the metal bar grinding against the bone in my shoulder; but the door held firm. I stepped back and made a small running lunge, but I hit the bar with a dead, shoulder-wrenching thud that seemed to have no impact on the door's solid resistance. In the middle of my second lunge, though, the sea gave a sudden boost to my efforts: the ship pitched sharply forward, and I hit the bar like a small hard fist, the door yielding suddenly with a crack and hurling me out into the storm and night.

I found myself sprawled on a deck thick with rushing water, eyes blinded by wind and rain and head reeling. I tried to stand but the ship was rolling to port, and a torrent of water caught me at the knees and flung me towards the rails. For maybe five seconds I stood pinned there by the roll of the ship and the rush of water at my back, staring helpless as the ship completed its roll and the sea opened up before me with a yawn, so close I could have thrust my fist into it, the great wall of a wave stretched over me in a long curve that ended in jagged white. And in the brief instant before the wave fell it seemed the world had become suddenly silent and still and calm, and that that moment of calm might stretch on endlessly, give me time to crawl down inside the sea's belly and see what spoils of storms and tempests lay

half-digested there, as if I had grown suddenly god-like and could command the movement of the world at will; but then the water closed around me, and the moment faded into darkness.

When I came to I was lying on my stomach on the starboard side of the deck. My pyjamas had been pulled half way down my buttocks, and my feet were only a yard from the rails, but through some instinct my hand had reached out to clutch a handhold, and when I pulled myself up by it I found myself at the foot of the stairwell that led to the upper deck. The ship was just beginning another roll to port, but I managed to pull myself up the first few steps, free of the flood that was rushing again across the deck, where I sat for a moment with both arms clutching the railing while my lungs coughed up sea water and my mind slowly emerged from blackness and stupor. My body ached as if a thousand hammers had been pounding at it. Finally I rose and lurched up to the upper deck, arms gripped around the railing, the rain and wind lashing at me with a violence that numbed my skin.

The captain's door slammed inward when I turned the handle, and a flurry of wind and rain swept me into the room. I tried to force the door closed but could not, and it banged wildly against the wall behind it, while the glass and gold baubles of the room's chandelier swayed and tinkled in the wind's swirl and the rain fell in curved sheets onto the room's thick carpet. But two white-stockinged feet were protruding undisturbed over the end of one of the captain's couches, and I came round to find the doctor snoring there as peacefully as a lamb, jacket undone and collar open, an empty wine bottle clutched to his chest and a thin stream of spit running down from a corner of his open mouth.

'Doctor,' I said, nudging his shoulder, and almost shouting to be heard over the raging of the wind. Rain and sea dripped down from me, seeping into the thick carpet. 'My mother's sick.'

'*Lasciami sta*,' the doctor muttered, his breath thick with the smell of wine. Little beads of sweat glistened on his forehead.

I nudged again, harder.

'My mother wants you to come.'

'*Lasciama sta*,' he mumbled again, rolling away from me. 'I did the best that I could.'

'Doctor, my mother's sick,' shaking more firmly now. 'She said you should come.'

'Hmmm?... Who is it?' He let go of his bottle and let it tumble to the floor, brought his hands up to rub his eyes and wipe his mouth, then looked at me through squinting lids.

'My mother's sick,' I said.

'Eh?... Why are you shouting like that, for Christ's sake? *Ma chi sei tu*?'

'Vittorio.'

'Ah?... Look at you--stand back at little, you're dripping all over my suit.' He began to slowly ease himself up from the couch now. '*Ma sei scimunito*, what, have you been out in this weather? In your pyjamas, *che strunzo*! And all this wind, you didn't even close the door. Were you born in a stable?... Who, Vittorio?'

'Vittorio Innocente. My mother's sick, she said you should come.'

'Sick?' The doctor rubbed the back of his neck with a grimace. 'It's just the weather. Go shut the door, *per l'amore di Cristo*, I

have a headache that would kill a whale. Innocente.'

'I couldn't get it closed when I came in,' I said, sitting now on the coffee table in front of the couch, to keep myself steady, and trembling from cold and fear. My skin itched as if small worms were crawling underneath it.

The doctor winced and rose painfully from the couch, mumbling curses, then lurched towards the open door.

'Innocente. Innocente. You're that woman's son, aren't you, the pregnant one who thinks she's a princess. Look at the mess of the floor now.' He slammed the door shut with a heave of his shoulder, and immediately the room became calm and quiet. Before returning to the couch he leaned against the wall for a moment and pulled a little bottle out of the inside pocket of his jacket, then unscrewed the bottle's top and took a swig of the golden liquid inside.

'*Bè*, so what is it,' he said, lurching back to the couch to put on his shoes. 'Look, now my socks are soaked. *Addio*.'

'My mother told me to call you,' I said desperately. 'She was throwing up and making noises even after she stopped. I was throwing up too but I wasn't making any noises, anyways not the same ones.'

'Eh?... Noises. Look at you without any shoes. If you die from pneumonia you'll have yourself to blame.' He had slipped his shoes on now and was moving towards a doorway opposite the one I'd come in through. 'Everyone gets sick in a storm if they're not used to it. It's nothing serious. Come downstairs and I'll give you some pills. Nowadays they have pills for everything--constipation, diarrhea, malaria, hangovers. Pretty soon they won't need doctors anymore, only

pharmaci sts.'

The door we went through led into a narrow hallway--I remembered now having been through it once with Antonio. It ran the length of the upper deck, a high line of windows along the outer wall looking out into the storm and the night. Uniformed officers were lurching out of doorways and hurrying down the hall in one direction or another, all of them casting backward glances at me as they passed.

'*Buona sera, dottore, ma ch'è successo a quest' ragazzo*? Don't tell me he's been outside in this weather? The doors are all supposed to be locked, if the captain finds out he'll have somebody's balls.'

'There's no problem,' the doctor said casually, 'everything's under control.'

The doctor led me down a stairwell and we came out on the main deck not far from the infirmary. The door that I had passed through to get outside was closed now, though the hallway was still deserted.

'How did you get outside?' the doctor was saying. His body swayed like a great bending sail as he walked, though he kept to the centre of the hall, ignoring the handrails along the walls. 'I don't know what got into your head to go out there. Why didn't you go to the nurse? Here, I'll give you some pills for your mother.... Louisa!' The doctor flicked on the lights as he stepped into the infirmary. 'Louisa, *ma che fai, dormi*? You're on duty tonight, *alzati*, and with half the ship probably trying to find you, you hide yourself in the dark. *Alzati*, how can anyone sleep in weather like this?'

A moan came from the ward. The doctor went through a door behind the reception desk and came out with a little plastic pill container.

'Here,' he said, handing it to me, 'tell her to take two of these every two or three hours. And change out of those clothes.'

'But she wants you to come,' I said, my lip trembling; I was beginning to despair of ever getting him down to the room. 'She's making noises. She wants you to come to see her. She said the pains are only a few minutes away.'

'The pains?' A roll caught the doctor by surprise and he stumbled backwards against the room's desk, its bolts groaning under his weight. 'What pains?'

I shrugged my shoulders helplessly, my eyes clouding with tears. 'She said to say about the pains.'

'*Madonna*,' the doctor said, a hand coming to his brow in understanding, 'she's having her baby. Louisa! *Per l'amore di Cristo, alzati!* We're having a baby!'

The doctor hurried back into the room behind him, and I heard shelves and cupboards opening and slamming shut; he came out a moment later carrying a small black bag. A bleary-eyed Louisa--I saw now how young she was, just a girl, perhaps seventeen or eighteen, with large black eyes and a small, upturned nose--was standing in the doorway of the ward, uniform crinkled and bonnet askew.

'A baby?'

'Bring some ether, Loui, *sbrigati*. And a basin.'

The doctor and I were already running headlong down the hallway, and a minute later I saw Louisa following behind us, a basin clutched to her small chest with one hand and her other still reaching down to slip on a shoe as she stumbled out of the infirmary doorway.

XXXIX--A WINTER'S TALE

My mother lay in the same position I'd left her in, knees up and hands clutched to the bed posts, though her breathing seemed calmer than before.

'A few minutes more,' she said weakly as we came in, 'and I would have had to do it myself....The water broke.'

The doctor felt the mattress between my mother's legs. His hand came away wet.

'How long ago?'

'A few minutes.'

'The baby's early?'

'About a month.'

'Louisa, we'll have to put her on the floor. With this ladder in the way I can't do a thing. Spread some blankets out.'

I realized now, with horror, what was about to happen: the thing inside my mother was coming out. *Kill it with a knife as soon as it's born, and cut out its eyes.* My eye went to the closet, where my knife lay hidden.

Louisa had reached up to the top bunk and pulled the blankets and pillows down. She arranged them on the floor, pushing chairs and coffee table towards the wall. The lights had stopped flickering now and rolling of the ship seemed to have abated, though rain and waves were still slashing against the portholes. Louisa had set the basin she'd brought with her on the coffee table; a quart-sized silver cannister was shifting inside it with the ship's roll, metal against metal.

I moved towards the closet as the doctor and Louisa lifted my mother onto the ground, Louisa grabbing under her arms and the doctor under her knees. My mother was still breathing steadily but her face and hair were wet with sweat. The doctor took off his jacket, turning away from my mother, and slid his bottle out of his inside pocket to take a quick pull.

'Get her ready, Louisa,' he said, throwing his jacket over a chair. He reached into his bag and pulled out a thick bar of brownish soap wrapped in clear cellophane, then stepped around my mother towards the bathroom, rolling up his sleeves as he went.

Louisa came around to my mother's legs and pulled her night gown up over her knees, then reached up to pull off her underwear. The underwear was dripping wet.

'Do you want me to shave her?' Louisa said.

'There's no time,' the doctor called, shouting to be heard above the sound of the tap. 'The baby will start coming any minute now.'

As if on cue, my mother's breathing became suddenly quick and sharp. Her body tensed and she stopped breathing for a few long seconds, fists clenching the blankets beneath her, eyes squeezed shut; and finally a long, open cry passed out of her, dying down in slow degrees, like a wave spending itself on a shore. Her breathing did not calm down now, though, and only a moment passed before the next cry swept over her.

The doctor had come out of the bathroom and picked the silver cannister out of the basin.

'Give me my bag.' Louisa handed it to him and he pulled out a small

package, tore it open with his teeth, and slid out a wad of gauze. He poured some of the contents of the cannister onto it, and knelt at my mother's head.

'What are you doing,' my mother said, between breaths. 'You smell--like a winery.'

'It's just the anaesthesia.'

'No. No anaesthesia.'

'Be reasonable, signora,' the doctor said, hand still hovering above my mother's head. 'Why would anyone want to put themselves through this pain?'

'I want--to see--everything--' But another spasm gripped her, and the doctor brought the gauze down over her face. Her cry came out muffled. The doctor held the gauze there a long moment, until my mother's body seemed to relax a little, the muscles around her eyes easing as if she had fallen into a troubled sleep, and her breathing growing more calm and rhythmic.

'Louisa, come up here and give her a dose of this every few minutes.'

The doctor knelt down between my mother's legs and pushed her night gown up to her belly, then reached over her raised knee to pull a slim package out of his bag. The package held two gloves of thin, translucent plastic, which the doctor slipped over his hands with two deft tugs, the gloves stretching over his thick fingers and palms like an extra layer of skin. Then, one hand under each knee, the doctor spread my mother's legs apart until it seemed he would split her open and began probing with plastic fingers in the dark spot between her legs. I

I looked away.

'The head is starting to come through,' he said. 'Thank God it's not a breach.'

My mother was still moaning, not the body-shaking cries of before but the half-stifled groans of someone crying out from a dream. Several minutes passed when everything was quiet except for these half-cries; even the ship's creaking had died down, and the rain and waves had stopped pounding against the portholes. Everything seemed poised at a point of stillness, on the edge of some yawning chasm. My teeth began to chatter: I was shivering, my clothing still clammy and cold, sticking to my skin with a starchy dampness.

The hunch of the doctor's broad, white-shirted back blocked my view of my mother now. But when he shifted position I saw that his gloved hands were clutching at the top of a cheesey bluish-black sphere that was pushing itself out like a giant egg from between my mother's legs.

'Go easier on the ether,' the doctor said. Louisa still knelt at my mother's head, bringing her wad of gauze down every few minutes. She seemed tired and dreamy, long-lashed eyelids drooping over her large black eyes.

'It's not coming out,' the doctor said. 'Get my forceps out of my bag.'

Louisa rummaged with her free hand in the doctor's bag.

'They're not here.'

'They're there, I put them there.'

Louisa shrugged.

'I can't find them. Do you want me to go up and get them?'

'No, I want you here,' the doctor said, irritated. 'I'll send the boy. *Come ti chiamo, ragazz'*?'

'Vittorio,' I said.

'Yes, yes, that's right, *bè*, Vittorio, I want you to go upstairs to the infirmary and into the examining room, the room at the back. Inside the third drawer of the first cabinet on the right you'll find something that looks like two big spoons joined together so that when you hold the handles you can open and close them like a mouth.' He had taken his hands out from between my mother's legs to flap them open and closed like jaws. 'Understand?'

I nodded.

'O.K., go. And be quick. And when you come back you change out of those clothes.'

Maintenance people had begun to crawl out of their closets now that the storm was subsiding, grey-overalled men who grinned at me through crooked teeth and thick-waisted women in hairnets and rubber gloves, mopping up stairwells and running wet rags along railings and walls.

'*Ma do' vai, ragazz'*?'

But I kept running, breathless by the time I reached the back room of the infirmary and flicked on the lights. The walls in this room were lined with counters and cupboards and cabinets, a large double sink of gleaming porcelain interrupting the counter along one wall. In the centre of the room stood a bed-like table upholstered in glossy black leather, rising up from the floor on a huge silver pillar. A dark lamp stretched out on a long, bent arm from the table's head, hovering over the table like a blind eye.

I turned to the first cabinet on the right and opened the third drawer. Inside I saw two pairs of scissors, one long and thin and one short and squat; a long silver-handled thing with a brightly polished circle of steel at the end, which reflected my face back deformed; a strange pair of glasses with screw on lenses; and, at the bottom of the drawer, under some packets of cotton, a pocket-sized magazine which pictured a dreamy-eyed woman draped in a shroud of transparent gauze on the cover. But no mouth-like spoons.

I had formed a clear image of what the spoons looked like: long-handled scoops with sharp, cutting edges, jagged as teeth. Somehow the doctor knew, too, what was slowly emerging from my mother's belly; and when it came out the doctor would clamp the head between steel jaws and sever it. I went through the other three drawers in the cabinet, found boxes full of wooden sticks, more packages of cotton and gauze, long rolls of brown bandage, but no double spoons. I began to search systematically through the other cabinets in the room, tearing open drawers and cupboards, always hoping the thing would appear calm and gleaming in the next place I searched but growing more desperate as it failed to, checking and rechecking places I thought I'd gone through too quickly. Finally I pulled up a stool and climbed onto the counter, and began to go through the cupboards above it. Here were all manner of bottles and metal containers, arranged in wooden racks that held them in place; but no spoons. Then with the third door I opened a loose bottle came rolling off a shelf, and before I could reach out to grab it, it struck against the edge of the counter and shattered finally on the white-tiled floor, splattering a reddish-brown liquid that filled the room with an

acrid, sickly-sweet smell.

In a panic now, my eyes turning wet, I scrambled to the floor and ran back down to cabin 213.

'I can't find it!' I cried as I opened the door, finally bursting into tears. But another cry answered my own from the bathroom, small but strong, and the doctor looked up at me from where he still knelt between my mother's legs.

'You're too late,' he said. 'It's all over.'

Louisa came out of the bathroom carrying a small bundle swaddled in a white sheet.

'Say hello to your little sister,' she said, coming towards me and leaning forward. I started back, and Louisa laughed; but the face I was staring into, though small and ugly, its skin sickly blue and wrinkled up like a dried olive, was decidedly human. It screwed up now into a grimace and let out a cry.

'She doesn't like you,' Louisa said. 'Brothers and sisters never get along.'

'Bring it upstairs and arrange a bed for it, we'll keep it under plastic till we get to port,' the doctor said. 'Though I hate to think how big it would have been in a month, it must be three kilos now....And bring some new sheets down for the beds. These are a mess.'

Louisa left the room, taking with her the small wrinkled thing in her arms. My mother was lying peacefully now: she seemed asleep, her arms limp at her sides, her head rolled to one side on her pillow. The doctor was still crouched between her legs, holding in his gloved hands, stained now with brownish blood and with a white substance that looked

like soft cheese, a grey tube that coiled down into my mother. Underneath the doctor's hands sat the metal basin Louisa had brought; he seemed to be waiting for something. We waited like that for a few long moments, without speaking or moving, my mother lying peacefully on the floor, her breathing now calm and steady, the doctor on his knees with his fists closed around the grey cord. Finally, as if he could bear waiting no longer, the doctor gave a small tug, a mere twitch of his hand, like a kiss that was more just a breath on a cheek than the meeting of lips and skin; but immediately a fleshy mass flowed out from between my mother's legs into the waiting basin, dark and bloody. I turned away, my stomach churning.

'That's it,' the doctor said. 'There may be a little bleeding for a while, but nothing to worry about.'

Louisa came in now with the sheets.

'*Dio*, what a mess you made up there!' she said to me, getting to work on the beds. 'Those stains will never come out. The doctor will have me on my knees the whole day! I hope you didn't cut yourself, pretty soon we'll have the whole ship in the infirmary.'

In a few minutes my mother had been lifted, still sleeping peacefully, into her bed, and the doctor and nurse had collected their things. Though it seemed like a long time had passed, outside the portholes the sky was still night-dark; but the storm had passed completely, a thousand stars glinting again in the blackness. It seemed now that the storm had been a dream; but my skin still itched and crawled under my damp pyjamas, and the image of the sea's black mouth loomed up suddenly before me again.

'For the last time, get out of those clothes,' the doctor said. 'Take a hot shower to get the salt off your skin and then go to bed. I'll come by in the morning to check on your mother.'

He turned round to pick up his coat from where he'd draped it, but then stooped suddenly to pick something off the floor. My mother's orange: it had been lodged between a chair leg and the wall.

'Breakfast,' he said, peeling into it. A gush of juice squirted up at his shirt, and he wiped at it with a curse. When he'd finished peeling he portioned out the orange among us, and for a moment the three of us stood silently eating in the centre of the cabin, like peasants taking a rest in the fields.

'A good night's work,' the doctor said finally, on his way out. As the door swung shut I saw his hand go to Louisa's behind, and Louisa gave a little yelp.

I was left alone with my sleeping mother. I got out of my clothes and took a shower, soothed by the feel of the hot water against my skin, scrubbing hard to get off the salt. Then I pulled on a pair of long underwear and a thick long-sleeved undershirt and put out the lights. I was about the climb up to my bed--a great fatigue had overtaken me now that I was finally going to sleep, and my body felt suddenly sore and stiff, as if covered with bruises--when my mother called to me softly.

I went to her bedside. She looked up at me in the darkness through dreamy, slowly-blinking eyes.

'*E fatto*?' she whispered.

'*Sì*.'

'A boy or a girl?'

'A girl.'

'Lie down beside me.'

I crawled under her sheets and snuggled against her, drawing my head under her chin. Her belly felt soft and flabby now, and her hair was still dank with sweat; but I stayed close and tight beside her, wanted to crawl up inside her warmth.

'*Figlio mio*,' she whispered, kissing me on the forehead. And almost as soon as I closed my eyes, I was asleep.

I awoke some time later from a dream of lying in a pool of warm water. I was back in Valle del Sole, in the room where a soldier had once shot a spider off the wall. My mother was lying limp and still beside me, her breathing soft and slow. I slid out from her arms to go down behind the stable to pee--but from the grey light through a window I made out the shapes of a table and chairs, of a painting on the wall, and my feet were leading me not to the stable but to a small dark room nearby, where I groped up against a cold, glassy bowl rising up from the floor. I was still in my sea-soaked pyjamas, saw the wall of a wave closing over me again; or no, I had peed in my bed, the wetness was warm and gluey, not the clammy salt-cold of the sea. It ran down my back and my seat and my legs, my underwear clinging to my skin as I pushed them down to pee; and my hand, too, holding my small bird as the pee splashed down into the bowl, was wet and viscid, there was something....My mind awoke now with a little shock, and I flicked on the bathroom light, rubbed my eyes with my knuckles, and looked down at my clothes.

An elderly man who my mother had been friendly with was just stepping out of his room when I came into the hall. He stared at me a

moment in soundless horror, and when I did not answer his questions he went into room 213 and came out white a moment later, then hurried towards the stairs to the upper deck. After a few minutes the doctor came down, still in pyjama top, the broken veins on his cheeks shining like rivers in a desert, and behind him Louisa, carrying the doctor's small black bag; and finally Darchangelo, eyes black-circled from sleeplessness and face flushed, followed closely by the old man.

'Take him into your room and wash him,' Darchangelo said, then went into room 213 and closed the door.

I was lying in a tub in the old man's room, the water crimsoned with my mother's blood, when Darchangelo knocked on the door. He sat on the edge of the bed, head in hands, while I dried myself and slipped into the clothes he had brought for me. When I came out finally he hugged me tightly, and whispered to me between his tears, as if telling me a secret, that my mother had died.

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XL--AFTERMATH

The next few weeks, months, years, I passed in delirium. I had contracted pneumonia, and spent the rest of the voyage, and several weeks after it, in a high fever, though the delirium seemed to last long past the time the fever broke. From that time I have only fragmentary memories--the face of the doctor peering over me from a great distance, cracked and distorted like a curved mirror; Antonio Darchangelo hovering
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beside me like a blank-faced soldier as I floated off a ship on a cloud; a thousand wild voices babbling sounds which stretched, without rhyme or meaning, in long jagged lines to the ends of the earth; a clean white room whose rough ceiling was the surface of the moon. Also a guardian to the gates of hell, a man in a red suit and stiff cap whose face was black as coal. A large, orange balloon floating calmly by in the sky, and someone in a basket beneath waving goodbye, goodbye to a friend on the earth. A pair of sharp-edged silver spoons the size of young men leaning tiredly against a grey wall, rifles slung over their shoulders. And two blue flames--flames which did not take me by surprise, which I had expected all along to find at the end of the voyage--that slowly died into eyes as they watered over, and spilled finally a hot drop on my cheek.

But also a man I had not expected to see: a stranger who was my father, and after all not the black-haired tyrant I had imagined but a man with tired eyes whose hair had greyed and whose cheeks were rough and weather-beaten; who came to me in my moon-surfaced room and cried without shame over the cloud I lay on; who sat beside me on a coal-dust-filled train, a swaddled bundle in his awkward arms, as we rolled down a desolate landscape, bleak and snow-covered for as far as the eye could see. He had not known, I found out later, of my mother's presence on La Saturnia until the cable had arrived which announced her death; and whatever dream it had been that had led my mother to cross the sea, it had not included my father.

But all these later events happened in a mist. Before the mist set in, though, I was granted a few final moments of clarity--time enough to

witness my mother's funeral, which took place the morning after her death, and which I was allowed to attend because no one, not even myself, had noticed that I was burning up with fever.

It was held at the ship's stern, at sunrise, just beyond the sun deck. The weather was stubbornly clear, the sky dawning ethereal blue and rose where the sun was just edging above the still surface of the sea. A few of the other passengers attended--the old man, and a grey-haired German from first class who my mother had sometimes spoken with on the sun deck--as well as Antonio and the captain, hats in hands, the ship's chaplain, Louisa, a few of the other officers, a sombre and sober Dr. Cosabene. Louisa cried and sniffled through the whole service, but most of the others retained an almost stony calm, stiff and awkward, as if the bright sun and clear sky made them feel unnatural in their mourning. My mother's body, enclosed in a canvas bag and covered with a flag of bright red, white and green, lay on a small platform that rose up above the rail and pointed out to sea. The chaplain read from his missal, and prayed that his rites would be heard by the Lord in the place of those that had been missed on my mother's death bed; Antonio began a short eulogy, but stopped part way through in tears. Then a young officer with frail, grey eyes and long, thin fingers played a song on a golden bugle, while the others bowed their heads in silence.

But it was all theatre. Didn't they know that when the song was over my mother's face would emerge from the canvas bag with a smile and a curse, and she'd say, 'Vittorio,' squinting her eyes and pouting her lips, 'look at you, always so serious.' And everyone would laugh. Not a miracle--a mistake, the kind of thing where dead people were not dead

or where they could sometimes come back to life again, like that--the way the wheat, frozen under the snow for the winter, was suddenly green and alive in the spring. It could happen, it would, now, in a minute....

But when the song ended, silence followed it, broken only by the churning of the ship's propellers, and the flap of a flag on the ship's mast. The chaplain, now, made a sign of the cross, and on a nod from the captain Antonio's hand slipped over a lever underneath the platform, hesitated there for a moment, then finally wrenched the lever back, hard. The platform tilted sharply, and the canvas sack slid suddenly out from under the flag; but before it could strike the still surface of the sea, my knees buckled beneath, and my mind went black.

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XLI--RITA

The sea, the sea.... That evening I lay white-gowned in the infirmary, with a temperature of a hundred and four. The day nurse, Maria, older and more motherly than Louisa, her uniform smelling of starch rather than perfume, roused me from my slumber to feed me a bowl of chicken soup, then left me briefly to go down for her own supper. The soup seemed to curb my fever temporarily, because I felt suddenly clear for a few minutes, clear enough to look around the room and realize where I was, and to see the one bed in the corner whose barred sides had been raised and whose occupant had been enclosed in a large plastic
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cube, two small grey tanks breathing coiled tubes into the cube's canopied air. I climbed out of my bed and stepped bare-footed across the cool floor, put my face in between two metal bars and up close to the plastic. The baby was staring up at its plastic ceiling, waving its wrinkled limbs as if clutching at the air. I tried to get its attention, tapped on the plastic, made little gurgling noises, and finally it turned towards me, a stream of spit dribbling down its ruddy cheek. I made a face to make it laugh, but its small grey eyes--they were not yet the deep blue they would become--seemed to stare right through me.

I am not sure even now who named her, but the name she was registered under at Halifax was Margherita Perdita: Margherita from my mother's middle name, which anyone could have found in her passport, and Perdita, for 'lost,' or 'ruined,' from some instinct of the namer towards truth, perhaps, towards affixing a label which could carry the weight and memory of a solemn history. But it was she herself who later chose how she would come to be known: her birth into language came one rainy night in the spring of 1959, when, seeing her own reflection as I raised her small body to a window to show her the storm and lightning, she lifted a finger to the glass and formed her lips around the two lonely syllables of her first word, Ri-tah, which became ever afterwards the only name she would respond to.

I turned away from her now and saw that the clothes I had been wearing that morning at the funeral were draped over a chair near the doorway, and I went over and pulled my pants on over my gown, slipped into my shoes, and crept out of the infirmary down the hall. The big door that had cracked my bones the night of the storm opened easily now, and

I stepped out onto the deck and made my way towards the ship's stern. The sun deck was almost deserted--it was supper hour. At the ship's prow the sun would just be setting, laying a crimson sheen over the water's surface; but at this end of the ship the sky was already a cobalt blue, rich and deep.

I stood at the railing for a long time, staring back at the snake-like curve of the ship's wake, at the magic line where the deep blue of the ocean met the deep blue of the sky. After a while my knees began to feel weak and the fever began to creep up on me again, setting my head spinning; the words of an old song were floating into my head, surfacing like little bits of wood from a place that was no longer visible on the horizon, that had slipped away in the ship's wake, been swallowed into the sea:

Vorrei far ritornare un ora sola
Il tempo bello della contentezza
Quando che noi giocando a vola vola
Di baci io ti coprivo e di carezze

Ehhhh--vola vola vola vola
E vola lu pavone
Il cuore mio e buono
E fammi lo provar.

I realized with a start that I'd been singing out loud, a small mumble that died now as I became aware of it, and I glanced around me to see if anyone had heard. Behind me my mother's grey-haired German friend had come up on deck with a young woman, and the two of them, not noticing

me, eased themselves into deck chairs, laughing and talking in a language I couldn't understand.

Tears had come to my eyes, and I turned back to the water and thrust my fists into my pockets. In one of my pockets my fist came up against something hard and cool--my lucky coin. I pulled it out and held it in an open palm for a moment, stared through wet eyes at the wounded, open-winged eagle. But when I flipped the coin over to see the muscled bust on the other side it slipped somehow through my fingers and fell with a hollow clang to the deck, where it rolled for a moment in a wide, slow arc before tilting fatally towards the rails, and falling into the sea.